

Guidelines For Fostering Feral Kittens

Fostering kittens in a home environment can be a wonderful experience; however, it is important to keep in mind that being a foster parent means increased responsibility. Most kittens who need to be fostered require a lot of time and energy to prepare them for adoption, especially orphaned newborn kittens feral kittens who need to be socialized. Prior to fostering, make sure you are fully aware of and fully equipped for what it means to be a foster parent. For more information or for questions on fostering and socializing feral kittens, please contact our office.

Trapping Feral Kittens

Kittens will make themselves visible when they are about four to six weeks old, once they begin eating solid food. ACR recommends trapping kittens between the ages of five and eight weeks, when they have developed enough to leave their mother but still young enough to be tamed.

Feral kittens are usually hard to catch and will hide in any small hole not accessible to humans. ACR recommends using baited traps for safe handling and transporting. They look just like any domestic kitten; however, they have wild instincts and can be aggressive. They have been taught by their mother to defend themselves with teeth and claws. So always wear gloves when handling feral kittens and never underestimate their quickness.

Fostering Feral Kittens

Warm Environment

Kittens should be confined to a large cage in a spare room that has limited foot traffic. Adding a cat den or small box to the cage will help kittens feel safer. Line the cage with newspaper and provide a litter box, along with food, water, and kitten milk replacer (KMR) if necessary. For the first day, do not attempt to handle the kittens. They must first learn to feel safe. Visit them frequently, talking softly so they get used to your voice. You can also turn on a radio or TV so they get used to human voices.

Feeding

For kittens who are eating solid food, wet and dry kitten-specific food should be readily available at all times. Refill and wash food and water bowls at least twice a day.

Proper Hygiene

Because kittens have weakened immune systems, proper hygiene is of the utmost importance. For small messes, use damp paper towels or pre-moistened baby wipes to clean a kitty. If a kitten becomes particularly dirty, you can give her a bath but use caution; again keeping kittens warm and dry is vital. Under warm running water, only wash the area that is dirty; do NOT immerse the entire kitten in water. Use a mild dish liquid and make sure to rinse thoroughly. Gently dry the kitten with a soft towel and immediately place her on a heating pad.

In addition to keeping the kittens clean, it is important to keep their sleeping area clean by changing soiled blankets and make sure to properly disinfect all bowls.

Kittens are susceptible to respiratory diseases such as feline herpes virus and calicivirus. Symptoms include sneezing, coughing, and nasal and eye discharge. A mild case can be treated by providing a warm environment, cleaning the eyes and nose areas, and using a vaporizer. Antibiotics will not help treat URIs, which are viral infections, but are sometimes used to combat secondary bacterial infections. Conjunctivitis of the eyes requires constant cleaning with moist, warm cotton balls and application of Terramycin or Chlorasone

a few times per day directly in the eyes. If left untreated, upper respiratory infections can cause severe health problems, pneumonia, eventual blindness, or even death.

If a kitten needs to be medicated, use liquid medicine in moist food, or crush tablets into baby food (meat flavor only, no garlic ingredients). Whole tablets should not be administered to a feral kitten because it may cause trauma and can undo the taming process. It also increases the risk of one being bitten.

Feral Kittens with a Mother Cat

The mother cat should allow all kittens to nurse. She should be washing and grooming them regularly. Make sure the mother is also taking care of herself: eating/drinking, going to the bathroom, and cleaning herself. If the mother does not show any interest in caring for a particular kitten, it is usually because she instinctively knows the kitten is not going to survive. Try to encourage the mother to care for any kittens she is ignoring, but only do this safely—don't stress her. If she clearly is not going to care for a particular kitten(s), you will need to remove the kitten and begin bottle feeding.

Wet and dry kitten-specific (high in protein and calories) food should be readily available at all times. It's also recommended to provide the mother cat with a bowl of KMR for extra nutrients. Refill and wash food and water bowls at least twice a day.

When the kittens are around 2 to 3 weeks old, you can attempt to pet them. You will have to gauge the mother cat and how agreeable she is to letting you handle her kittens. Mothers can be very protective of their young, so take extreme caution. The easiest way to begin the taming process is to sneak pets when you are cleaning the cage. As you're reaching into the cage to change the blankets or food, you can quickly and calmly give each kitten a few pets. The more you work with them and the mother cat, the easier and faster it will be for them to become socialized.

Vaccinations

All feral kittens should receive their first vaccines around six to eight weeks of age. Your veterinarian will administer a series of vaccines at three- or four-week intervals until the kittens reach 16 weeks of age. Kittens can receive their initial distemper vaccine around six to seven weeks of age, and their rabies vaccine between eight and 12 weeks of age. If fostering kittens too young to receive vaccines, it is important to use caution when allowing the kittens to interact with other cats.

Parasites

Nearly all feral and stray kittens have internal parasites (worms), as well as external (fleas, lice, mites) parasites. Parasites can cause loss of appetite, diarrhea, anemia, and can be deadly for a kitten. Once kittens weigh about 2 pounds, they can be treated with a monthly topical flea and worm medication, such as Advantage Multi.

Spay/Neuter

Once the kittens weigh 2 pounds, which is usually around 8 weeks of age, they are old enough to be spayed or neutered. Early-age or pediatric spay/neuter is very safe and the recovery time is usually very quick. Learn more about [early-age spay/neuter](#) here. It is vital that all kittens are spayed or neutered prior to being placed in adoptive homes. The goal is to stop the killing of healthy animals in shelters, and those of us who care about animals should NOT contribute to the problem by allowing unneutered cats to be placed in homes.

Taming Feral Kittens

The critical socialization period of a feral kitten is from 2 to 7 weeks of age. During this period the kitten should form bonds with humans and other animals. The process of taming kittens can take 4 to 8 weeks depending on

their age and degree of wildness. Friendliness is also a gene that passes along to kittens from the mother or the father, therefore, some kittens may retain their feral instincts no matter how well they are socialized. For more detailed information on how to socialize feral kittens, continue reading here.

Placement in Adoptive Homes

Sadly, most people who wish to adopt a cat want a friendly, fully socialized animal. Some people are afraid to tell potential new adopters that kittens were once feral, for fear they will not be placed. Alley Cat Rescue believes this is not in the best interest of the kitten. The kittens may retain some feral instincts and it is important to disclose this information to the adopter. “Unsocialized” or “not completely socialized” can be more appealing words to use when describing the kittens, rather than saying “feral.”

People’s perceptions about feral cats need to change. Education is important, and people must be made aware of the millions of feral cats living in alleys who need our understanding and our help, not fear and disdain. Most people who have lived with cats before will understand that many are shy and can act wild at times.

Feral kittens do best if there are no small children in the home. All the work you have done can easily be reversed by a child’s spontaneous activity and noise. This is vital to remember when placing kittens for adoption. The most suitable home is a calm environment so the kittens feel secure. Ideally, two kittens should be placed together in a home, or with another cat or friendly dog, or where an adult person is at home part of the day.

When a feral kitten is placed into a new home, ACR strongly recommends that the new guardian go through a similar “mini-taming” process with the kitten. The new home may be very confusing and scary at first; reinforcing the basic handling and trust-building exercises will help the kitten feel more relaxed and at home. Most kittens soon settle down happily into their new environment and start enjoying the luxuries offered.