

Guidelines For Socializing 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 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 kittens, please contact our office.

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.*

Any person attempting to socialize a feral kitten must be patient and totally committed. Do not take on too many kittens at one time, and always be cautious when working with feral kittens. Remember they are wild and will defend themselves if they feel cornered or threatened. Never handle a new feral kitten until you know how she will react towards you, and always wear protective gloves.**

After you have given the kittens a few days to settle in, select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel firmly around her body (do not cover her head) and pick her up. Keep her wrapped securely in the towel as you remove her from the cage and set her on your lap. If the kitten stays calm, pet her gently on the head from behind. Never approach from the front. Initially, hands will frighten feral kittens and they may bite when approached from the front. Continue to softly pet her head while you talk to her in a soothing voice. Some kittens may respond quickly to being petted, while others may take more time adjusting. Practice this step several times a day for several days, until each kitten is comfortable with being picked up and petted.

As the kittens become more comfortable with being handled, you can try to pet them without the towel. Gently grip the kitten's skin at the nape of her neck, put the towel on your lap, and set the kitten on the towel. Relax your grip and slowly stroke the kitten's body while speaking in soft reassuring tones. Some kittens may get scared and want to jump from your lap, so be prepared to wrap the towel back around her; but be careful not to scare her. Go through this process with each kitten, giving a special treat after being handled. Repeat this handling process as frequently as possible.

Within about a week the kittens should have made considerable progress, although each kitten will develop at a different rate. As the kittens become more comfortable being around people, they should be allowed access to the entire room and no longer be caged. It is important to limit hiding places and make sure the door to the room remains closed. Continue to make frequent visits to handle and play with the kittens. Use toys to encourage interaction and build trust. Wand toys are a great way to distract a kitten, while discreetly petting her. Provide a variety of scratch posts to train them on appropriate scratching areas and leave open carriers in the room to help acclimate them.

If there is another tame cat in the house who enjoys the company of kittens, this will help the taming process. Kittens are "copycats" and will follow the tame cat's behavior, coming over to be petted if they hear the tamer cat purring while being petted. Remember to always use caution when introducing new cats and ensure the adult cat has been vaccinated.

*Please note, you should also be prepared to find barn homes or a sanctuary for any kittens who are unable to be socialized. No matter how much time has passed and how much effort you put into taming a feral kitten,

some individuals do not warm up to human contact and will remain feral for life. It is in the best interest of the kitten to be placed in an appropriate outdoor (barn) home, rather than forcing her to live indoors if this is not the environment suited for her.

****Remember, feral kittens may try to bite and scratch. If you do get bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately with soap and water. Apply antibiotic ointment and cover with a bandage. If the wound is deep or does not heal after a few days, seek medical treatment. If the kitten has not been vaccinated and the doctor is concerned about rabies, assure him/her that you will quarantine the kitten for 14 days, an adequate time for determining rabies infection.**

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.

Many foster parents find the taming process extremely rewarding. Even though some tamed feral cats will continue to be a bit elusive, others will demand human contact constantly. People who have tamed feral kittens (and cats) have reaped many pleasures from their company.