

Feral Kittens and Pregnant Cats: Guidelines for Fostering and Socializing

Female feral cats usually look for safe, hidden places to give birth. The young offspring of feral female cats, or of abandoned domestic cats, learn from their mothers to be wary and distrustful of humans, and to hide and defend themselves against any perceived threat. The tiny kittens will spit and hiss if approached by humans, and though small, will bite and scratch if not handled properly. When dealing with feral kittens, as with any wild animal, you should have a pre-exposure rabies vaccination and keep your tetanus shot current. Minimize all risks by using the correct equipment.

In most areas of the U.S., except Northern regions with extreme cold, kitten season

can extend from February through November, however, most kittens are born during spring. Cats can have three litters each year, although two are more likely, with a gestation period of approximately 65 days. Cats, like many wild animals, overproduce to ensure survival of the species.

Kitten mortality rates are usually very high — often around 75 percent (Nutter et al., 2004). Many become sick from diseases that are treatable, such as upper respiratory infections (URIs), but without medical care and supportive treatment, weak kittens usually perish. Those kittens who survive this initial period often build up immunities to common diseases, and once a colony has been sterilized and stabilized, most of the cats remain healthy and viable for many years under the care and supervision of caretakers.

To Tame or TNR?

If your local shelter is euthanizing domestic kittens for lack of homes, you may want to consider trapping any pregnant feral females and having them spayed. You can also TNR any kittens when they are eight to



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Spring brings lots of mama cats and babies.

twelve weeks old and return them to the colony. Even at the young age of twelve weeks old, many kittens may be difficult to tame and socialize; returning them to the colony will free up available space at shelters for more adoptable cats. It is much easier to place tame kittens than feral ones, who may always retain some of their wild instincts. Peter Neville notes that even under ideal conditions “around 15 percent of kittens seem to resist socialization and demonstrate only limited willingness to becoming generally sociable adults” (Neville, 1992).

The critical socialization period of a feral kitten is from two to seven weeks of age. During this period the kitten should form bonds with humans and other animals. Friendliness is also a gene that passes along to kittens from the mother or the father. Researchers at the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition in Leicestershire, Great Britain have found that friendly fathers produce friendly kittens, and unfriendly or fearful toms propagate timid kittens — independent of the fact that the fathers are neither present nor involved in rearing the youngsters (Jablonski, accessed 2014).

The process of taming kittens can take four to eight weeks depending on their age and degree of wildness. First and foremost, any person attempting this process should 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 or strange feral kitten

until you know how she will react towards you, and always wear protective gear.



Cara Frye

It is critical to begin the socialization process for feral kittens early, between two and seven weeks of age.

There are many feral kittens, even if not socialized during the critical period, who can become affectionate and loving companions. They will need to be placed in adoptive homes as soon as possible because feral kittens tend to bond with one person. Be aware that a young feral cat who may be completely tame and loving with one person can revert to her wild state when placed in another home. It can sometimes take six months, a year, or even longer for that cat to bond with the new caretaker.

Alley Cat Rescue strongly advises that kittens be spayed or neutered before 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. Currently, compliance rates for sterilization of cats and dogs from public and private shelters is less than 60 percent (Marrion, accessed 2014).

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.



Shaida Tala Sabin

ACR recommends trapping feral kittens when they are between five and eight weeks of age; old enough to survive away from the mother, but still young enough to be tamed.

They 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 of feral kittens. 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.

How to Safely Foster a Feral Kitten

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 as early as 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.

It is also important to treat for internal and external parasites around six weeks of age. The majority of feral kittens are born with internal parasites, such as roundworms, and they can get fleas and ear mites from their mother. Parasites can cause loss of appetite, diarrhea, anemia, and can be deadly for a kitten. Most internal and external parasites can be treated with a topical medication, such as Advantage Multi.

When kittens reach about eight weeks of age and they weigh around two pounds, they should be sterilized. Take care to ensure their incision site remains clean and heals properly. A long-lasting antibiotic injection, such as Convenia, should be administered.

A feral kitten is usually frightened at first and may hiss and spit. Begin the taming process by confining the kitten to a large cage in a spare room or other location that

has limited foot traffic. Adding a cat den or other small box to the cage will help the kitten feel safer and more comfortable. 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 kitten. She must first learn to feel safe. Set up the cage in a quiet environment and visit her frequently. Talk to her so she gets used to your voice. You can also turn on a radio or TV for her to get used to human voices. Remember to always move slowly and quietly.

If the kitten needs to be medicated, use liquid medicine in moist food, or crush tablets into baby food. Whole tablets should not be administered to a feral kitten or cat because it may cause trauma and can undo the taming process. It also increases the risk of you being bitten.

If the kitten escapes from confinement, do not grab her with your bare hands. Use gloves or a carrier to catch her.

Caring for Orphaned and Newborn Kittens

If kittens are under five weeks of age and unable to eat solid food, bottle-feed them with kitten formula (KMR, Similac, or Just Born) obtained from veterinary clinics or pet supply stores. (Cow's milk does not contain enough fat or protein for kittens.) Make sure you hold the

kitten upright and do not force too much milk into her mouth or the fluid will go into her lungs and she could aspirate.

Young kittens should be kept in a box lined with absorbent paper towels; make sure they stay dry. Keep the box warm (around 90 degrees F) during the first two weeks of life, using a heating pad covered with a towel, or you can use an infrared lamp. It's very important to keep kittens warm.

For three-week-old kittens, decrease the temperature to around 80 degrees F. If a kitten is too weak to drink from a bottle, feed her with an eye dropper. Massage the belly to stimulate digestion, and use a cotton ball or paper towel to stimulate elimination of urine and feces after each feeding. Moist cotton balls can be used to clean the area afterwards. Rub Vaseline on the anal area. The mother usually cleans the babies during the first few weeks so you will have to take on this task. Begin weaning from three to four

Using a cat den helps feral kittens and cats feel safe

When a feral cat must stay at Alley Cat Rescue's clinic, we always have a cat den inside the cage. A feral cat finds safety in the small box. When it is time for a technician to clean the cage, the feral cat is either already in her den or will go into the den when the main cage door is opened; this makes cleaning the cage much easier and safer. A cat den also makes transporting a feral cat easier and safer.

weeks old. Mix canned kitten food with kitten milk formula and hand feed until the kittens are accustomed to eating on their own, then gradually change over completely to canned food.



Louise Holton

Orphaned feral kitten fostered and bottle-fed by the author.

If you do not have kitten formula on hand, use the following formula for temporary feeding only (12 to 24 hours): Add one egg yolk to eight ounces of cow's or goat's milk. Feed kittens two tablespoons per four ounces of body weight daily. Divide total amount into equal feedings. Small weak kittens should be fed every three to four hours.

The milk that is produced by the mother cat for the first two days after birth is called colostrum. This milk is high in protein and antibodies that protect the newborn kittens. Orphan kittens who do not have this protection should be vaccinated against rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, and panleukopenia at four weeks of age. Vaccination at an early age should only be considered for orphan kittens. If kittens remain with their mothers, they should receive their first vaccinations at

eight to ten weeks of age when they lose their maternally derived immunity.

Common Infectious Diseases

Kittens are susceptible to respiratory diseases such as feline herpes virus and calicivirus. Panleukopenia (feline distemper) and feline leukemia (FeLV) may be contracted in utero. Panleukopenia, if contracted before birth, can result in cerebellar hypoplasia causing balance and walking problems in a kitten, which start at two to three weeks of age. In unvaccinated populations, feline distemper is a very deadly and contagious disease. In rare cases, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) can be transmitted in utero.

Respiratory diseases cause sneezing, coughing, and nasal discharge. The exact cause of the URI is often difficult to diagnose and treat. The most probable cause is either rhinotracheitis or calicivirus. Often the disease becomes chronic and sometimes cannot be completely cured. The cat may sneeze or have runny eyes for most of her life.

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.

Nearly all feral and stray kittens have internal parasites (worms), as well as external (fleas, lice, mites) parasites. Once kittens weigh about two pounds, they can be treated with a monthly flea and tick medication, that also helps prevent worms.

Refer to the chapter on “Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Care-takers” for more information.

How to Tame Feral Kittens

After you have given the kittens about two days to settle in, select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel firmly around the kitten's 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.

You can also offer the kittens baby food from a spoon to help increase trust and build up their courage. Food can be a great incentive in taming a feral kitten; just make sure if using baby food, you only use plain meat-based foods that do NOT contain onion or garlic ingredients, which are toxic to cats.

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, and give a special treat after they all have been handled; it's important to reward them for their progress. Repeat this handling process as frequently as possible.

Within about a week the kittens should have made considerable progress. Remember that each kitten will develop at a different rate. As the kittens become more comfortable being around you and other humans, 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.

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. You may also want to leave open carriers in the room to help acclimate them.



Alley Cat Rescue

Spring kitten rescued by Alley Cat Rescue.

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.

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 home, rather than forcing her to live indoors if this is not the environment suited for her.

As emphasized previously, 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 cats or 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.

The taming process is extremely rewarding. Many tamed feral cats will continue to be a bit elusive, while others will demand human contact constantly. People who have tamed formerly feral companion animals have reaped many pleasures from their company.

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.

Any kittens who never really seem to outgrow their wild nature and are not good candidates for adoption can be considered for placement in barn homes. Refer to "Guidelines for Establishing an Effective Adoption Program" for more information on rehoming cats and

kittens and "Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats" if a barn home is necessary.

Caring for Pregnant Feral Cats

As discussed previously in the chapter on "Steps for Successful and Safe Trapping," there are several options to consider before trapping a pregnant feral cat. All available options should be discussed with your veterinarian prior to trapping, so an appropriate course of action can be established.

Feral cats may become stressed when they are held in captivity. Stress can cause illness and a mother's inability to properly care for her kittens, especially when giving birth. Providing a safe, quiet place for her, where she won't be disturbed, will minimize any stress and reduce the risk of birthing complications.

To safely foster a feral mother cat (or any feral cat) you will need a large cage and a cat den for her to hide in to feel safe. It is highly recommended that you keep the cage in a spare bedroom or other room that has limited foot traffic. Line the cage with newspaper and provide plenty of fresh, clean blankets or towels. Cover the top of the cage with towels or sheets to give her a safe environment. Limit your access to the room and the cage; only disturb her when changing food/water, the litter box, and blankets.

Leave her alone to give birth in a quiet environment. Some of the kittens could die, either at birth or from viral infections. 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 as described above.

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.

When the kittens are around two to three 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. (Refer to "Adopting an Adult Feral Cat" for more information.)

Conclusion

Fostering cats and kittens in a home environment can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, and it also frees up shelter space, so more cats can be assisted. However, it is important to keep in mind that being a foster parent means increased responsibility; most cats and kittens who need to be fostered require a lot of time and energy to prepare them for adoption. Prior to fostering, make sure you are fully aware of and fully equipped for what it means to be a foster parent. For more detailed information on fostering cats and kittens, and guidelines for establishing your own foster program, please refer to Addendum 3. An example foster parent agreement form can also be found in the back of the handbook.