



Tree House Humane Society

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Socializing Feral Kittens

Kittens that are born outside and not exposed to humans early in their lives learn from their mothers and quickly become afraid of people. However, if they are caught and handled at a young age, feral kittens can become socialized and adopted into loving homes with just a little work, patience and some good, old-fashioned TLC.

Kittens under four weeks old can usually be socialized within a matter of days, and kittens up to eight weeks old usually take anywhere from two to four weeks to socialize. Kittens 10 to 12 weeks old, and sometimes even a little older, can be tamed as well, but it will probably take a little longer. If you plan on socializing a kitten or cat over 14 weeks old, you should probably plan on keeping the cat, and be prepared for the possibility that the cat may never be fully socialized to people. Feral cats usually will form a bond to the primary caretaker, but when they are introduced to a new person, the process usually needs to start over from scratch, and makes for a very stressful situation for the cat and the new caretaker.

If you are up for the challenge of socializing kittens, then please read on:

A good way to gain the trust of the kittens, their mother, and the rest of the colony is by regularly feeding and engaging them in play using a wand toy, such as the cat dancer or the sparkler. This will make it easier to trap them and bring them inside. Once inside, the real work begins. If you cannot bring them inside, please plan on trapping the cats when they are old enough to be spayed/neutered (10-12 weeks at most clinics) and then return them to their colony. Kittens are old enough to be taken from their mother as early as four to six weeks old when they begin weaning.

Housing

After the kittens are inside, you will need to confine them in a large dog crate or similar cage. If you do not have a cage, you can keep them in small room, such as a bathroom, but be sure to block anything that they can get into, and remove anything breakable or that could injure them (basically, the room should be empty). The cage should contain a small litter box, food and water dishes and something to cuddle in, like a donut bed, towel, or blanket (a wool sweater can also work as it acclimates them to your scent). For very frightened kittens, a box or something similar to hide in, is essential for at least the first week, until they become less frightened of you. You may also want to cover or partially cover the cage with a blanket when you are not around to help the kittens feel more secure.

Whatever you do, DO NOT let feral kittens run loose in your house or reside with your other cats or other pets. They will hide in tiny spaces and they are very difficult to coax out. The experience will hinder, not help, their socialization.

Socialization Techniques

Food is your biggest ally. The kitten may hesitate to eat in front of you at first, but be patient, because as soon as the kittens associate you with their food, you will be well on your way! Try and encourage kittens to eat in your presence at first. If they still refuse, then leave the room for a few minutes and come back and check on their progress. Soon the kitten will associate you with their food and will eat in your presence. Try and meal feed the kittens mostly wet food (as much as they can eat in 15 minutes at least three times a day) and leave small amounts of dry food out as well if you will be gone for longer than six hours (about ½ cup per kitten). Leaving a huge bowl of dry food out at all times defeats the purpose, because the kittens will not associate you with the food. However, it is important that kittens eat enough, so use your best judgment and make sure they are getting enough to eat.

Obviously, if the kittens are not eating, you should take them to a veterinarian. Offering chicken baby food is irresistible to most kittens (and cats) so you can use it to coax especially shy or fussy eaters into eating. **The key is to first get them to eat in front of you, and then to get them to eat right next to you, and then for you to pet them while they are eating. Once you get that far, you can begin handling the kittens.**

Younger and less feral kittens can be handled right away. Wear gloves if you will feel more comfortable. It is important to be confident, yet gentle, when handling the animal. If a kitten acts nervous, gently use one hand to grab him by the scruff of his neck like his mother would, and use the other handle to cradle his behind. Next wrap the kitten in a towel allowing just her head to stick out. Then offer baby food or wet food on a spoon. If the kitten doesn't respond, dab a little on her nose or paw. Once she tastes it, she will want more and the bonding can begin.

When petting the kitten, approach the head from behind at first. Gradually begin to pet the face, chin and behind the ears while talking gently. A warm, damp washcloth is also good as it simulates the way the mother would wash her kitten. Try to have several 15-20 minute feeding/petting sessions with each kitten as many times a day as you can (ideally, at least twice a day). If a kitten really resists petting, use a soft wand toy such as the cat charmer to pet her through the cage at first. This puts a little more distance between you and the kitten.

Progress will depend on each kitten's age and temperament. Good signs are when the kittens fall asleep in your lap, vocalizes, plays, approaches you for food, and of course, purring. Once the kitten no longer runs away from you, you can confine her to a small kitten-proof room instead of a cage.

Expose the kittens to a variety of people. Everyone should use low voices and guarded movements at first, but the more people the kittens are exposed to the better. It will make them much more adoptable and help to prepare them for life in the real world. Consider having a kitten party, where people can take turns handling the cats while chatting and socializing quietly.

Important Tips

Handle feral kittens cautiously. Those little nails and teeth are sharp!

Do **not** give kittens cow's milk. It can make them sick!

Once the kitten is playing, use interactive wand toys for them to chase. Do not let them get accustomed to biting, chasing or scratching at your hands.

If the kittens are staying awake at night, try to play and socialize with them before bed and then cover their cage at night. You can leave a radio on during the day so they get used to human voices. Classical music is also useful for soothing the kittens while they are alone.

Normally, kittens come in litters. If this is the case, be sure to spend alone time with each kitten. It is natural for some kittens to be more outgoing than others and this will slow down the shyer kittens' progress.

Please note, the younger a feral kitten is when you start socializing her to humans, the easier it is and less time it takes to accomplish. On the other hand, if possible, please do not fully separate a feral kitten from its mother until it is weaned and eating food other than its mother's milk around 4 to 6 weeks of age. If the mother is friendly and you can work with them all, please keep the kittens together with their mother until the kittens are 6 weeks old. For socialization purposes it is best for a kitten to be with a sibling or another cat until they are 14 weeks old so they can go through their predatory play stage with another cat and not a human.