

Socialized Cat Guide



When conducting Trap-Neuter-Return, there is always the possibility that you will find stray cats who are socialized and friendly to humans, young feral kittens, or kittens who are not yet weaned from their mothers—orphans or “neonatal.” Cats who are socialized can be adopted into homes and kittens can be socialized, fostered, and also adopted.

This guide will explain how to socialize and care for feral kittens, how to raise neonatal kittens, and also how to find homes for any kitten or cat ready for adoption.

How to Find Homes for Stray Cats

- Try to Find the Cat's Home.
- Publicize and Promote the Cat for Adoption.
- Adopt the Cat into the Best Home Possible.

How and When to Care for and Socialize Feral Kittens

- How to Decide if You Should Remove the Kittens
- How to Care for Neonatal Kittens
- How to Socialize Feral Kittens

When caring for a feral cat colony and performing Trap-Neuter-Return, you are likely to encounter cats that are friendly even upon first meeting you. Stray cats act differently than feral cats—they tend to approach you more readily, vocalize more, and may look disheveled, as if they are not used to living on their own. A stray cat once had a home and is socialized to humans, but has become lost or abandoned. Follow these steps to either return her to her home or find her a new one.



1) Try to find the cat's home.



Check for a tag or microchip. If a cat has a tag, call any numbers and attempt to track down the guardian. The collar may only have a number for a veterinarian; a call there may help track down her home. A veterinarian or rescue group can also use a scanner to help you determine if the cat is microchipped.

- **Check local shelters and lost and found ads.** Calling local shelters and animal pounds to let them know you are caring for a lost cat can yield results. Shelters and pounds are usually the first place guardians call when looking for their cat, and they keep lists to help match up callers. Make sure to ask if they have found pet or lost pet sections of their website or at the shelter in the form of binders to search or post an entry. Be sure to check the shelter bulletin boards as well.



When you come across outdoor kittens, you may feel the need to immediately pick them up and bring them home with you, but that might not be the best thing for the kittens—or for you. Here are some guidelines on how to decide if kittens in a colony should be removed and socialized for adoption, and how to care for them should you choose to remove them and raise or socialize them yourself.

1. How to Decide if You Should Remove the Kittens

Deciding whether or not to remove kittens depends on a number of variables. Keep in mind that kittens not handled at an early age remain feral. The older they get the less likely it is that they will ever become socialized to humans, in which case it may be better for them to remain in their outdoor home. However, some kittens may need intervention if they are not doing well.

Remember that early weaning of kittens who seem to be doing well may lead to increased mortality or failure to thrive. Although kittens begin weaning prior to eight weeks of age, they should remain with their mother until then to learn proper behavior and socialization.

Ultimately, you have to use your own judgment depending on the kitten's circumstances and your time and resources. The best way to help all of the cats in the colony is to perform Trap-Neuter-Return and not spend all your time socializing kittens.

Feral kittens can be socialized if caught at an early age. There is no hard and fast rule on how many weeks old is “too old” for a kitten to be handled, or how long the socialization process will take. Typically, the older the kitten is, the longer and harder it will take to socialize her and may not be possible at all. **Based on your circumstances, and the kitten's, in some cases it may be better for both of you if the kitten is returned to her colony after surgery.** The following are guidelines that may help you estimate the kitten's age. Keep in mind these are just guidelines, not steadfast rules that will apply to every kitten.

- **How to Determine Kitten Age**

- *Under one week:* (3-8 oz) Eyes are shut, ears are folded down, and kittens are unable to walk. They can purr and make tiny noises. The umbilical cord may still be visible.

- *One-two weeks:* (8-11 oz) Eyes start to open (they are blue) and focus. Ears begin to open and movement is improved to crawling, snuggling, and kneading.

- *Three weeks:* (7.5-14.5 oz) Eyes fully open and ears are open and standing up. Kittens will start to respond to noises and movement. The first wobbly steps are taken and baby teeth start to come in.

- *Four-five weeks:* (8-16.75 oz) Running, playing, digging, and pouncing occur often. Kittens will start to wean and will be able to lap up formula, eat soft food, and use the litter box by themselves. Eyes have fully changed from blue to their adult color.

- *Eight weeks:* (2 lbs) Kittens look like little versions of full grown cats. This is the best age at which to begin the socialization process.

- **What to Do When You Find Kitten(s) Alone or Motherless**

If you find very young kittens that are alone, you must determine if the mother has abandoned them or if she is just off looking for food. The only way to find this out is to wait. Observe from a distance or a hidden spot for a few hours to be sure she is not returning. If she does come

back, you have multiple options to consider, outlined below. If she does not, you will need to determine if the kittens are young enough to be socialized, fostered or adopted, or if they are at the age to be trapped, neutered, and returned.

- If the mother does come back:

- You can trap the mother, pick up the kittens, and bring the whole family indoors into a quiet, small room (like a bathroom), or large cage. This option is best for semi-feral or socialized mother cats, as confinement is not an option for feral cats.

- If the mother is feral, you can leave the family outside where they are. The mother cat is definitely best able to care for the kittens. Provide a nice shelter, food, and water and make the environment as safe as possible for them. Once the kittens are weaned, you can place them in foster care for adoption and then trap, spay, and return the feral mother cat.

- If you feel the mother cat is not caring for the kittens properly or they are in danger, you can take the kittens away from her and raise them yourself. Remember, it is best for kittens to be with their mother for the first eight weeks. If you choose to remove the kittens from their mothers, be sure to spay the mother cat so you don't encounter more of her kittens in the future.

2. How to Care for Neonatal Kittens



Here are some important tips to keep in mind if you do end up having to care for a neonatal kitten (one to three weeks old). Be aware that sometimes, no matter what you do, some neonatal kittens do not survive and can fade very fast. You can only try to be the best surrogate guardian possible, and hope for the best.

- **Ask for Help:** Contact local veterinary clinics and no-kill shelters to ask if they have a nursing mother cat or experienced volunteers available to bottle-feed the kittens. People have had a lot of success having mother cats “adopt” more kittens.
- **Heat and Bedding:** Kittens can easily become chilled and can actually die from chilling within a short timeframe. Be sure that from the moment you find them, the kittens are kept constantly warm. Continually keep an eye out for signs of chilling (i.e., kittens are listless and feel cool to the touch). If you have nothing else on hand, use your own body heat to warm up a cold kitten, and rub gently to aide circulation. It is important to note that kittens cannot control their own body temperature until they are at least three-weeks-old. Do not bottle feed until kittens have warmed up completely.

At home, provide kittens with a soft nest (like a box or kitty bed) with a heating pad or other warming device. Completely cover it with a blanket or towel, and make sure that kittens can move away from the heat if they want. Change the bedding daily or as needed when accidents occur.

Chilling can occur after a kitten becomes wet. Never submerge kittens in water. If you need to wash them, wash only certain parts or use a moist wash cloth. Be sure to always fully dry them with a hair dryer (on low) and towel.

- **Food:** Never feed kittens cow's milk—this causes diarrhea. Feed only kitten formula, such as KRM, which can be purchased at most pet supply stores. Use kitten bottles to feed, as they are designed specifically with a kitten in mind. If you have an option for nipples, the elongated nipples are easier to use. Follow the directions of the bottle manufacturer for bottle preparation. You may have to make your own holes in the nipple with a sterilized pin or razor; be sure you do this correctly so that the kitten replacement milk drips out slowly when the bottle is turned upside down. Sterilize the bottles before using. Wash your hands before and after each feeding.

If you find yourself with a kitten and no store is open, this emergency kitten formula can be made at home. It should only be used in emergencies, and should not replace kitten formula.

8 oz. can evaporated milk

1 beaten egg yolk

2 TB Karo syrup

Mix all ingredients well and strain. Warm before serving. Keep refrigerated.

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- **Feeding:** Hold or place kittens on their stomachs and arch the bottle so less air gets in (do not feed kittens on their backs). Always warm the kitten replacement milk and test it on your wrist to be sure it is warm but not hot. Remember, do not feed chilled kittens.

Feeding should occur every two hours around the clock for kittens one week or younger. You can reduce feeding to every three to four hours at two weeks and from then on, most kittens can be fed about two to three times daily with a wet food/formula mixture. Follow the guidelines on the formula label for how much to feed. Kittens will usually stop nursing when full.

If you are having trouble getting a kitten to “latch” onto the bottle, try pulling on the nipple when they start to suck, this will encourage her to suck harder and latch on. You can also try moving the nipple back and forth in the kitten's mouth.

If your kitten is too ill to suck on a bottle, you may have to use other methods such as tube feeding. Consult a veterinarian before attempting this yourself.

Weaning occurs around four to five weeks of age. Mix formula with wet food so kittens can begin to lap it up, or put the mixture in a bottle. Then mix with dry food and begin providing water.

- **After feeding:** As long as kittens are eating formula, you must burp them. Put them on your shoulder or on their stomachs and pat them gently until you feel them burp. Kitten formula is sticky, so be sure to clean kittens after feeding with a warm, damp washcloth.
- **Elimination:** Kittens under four weeks must be stimulated in order to go to the bathroom after each feeding. Usually a mother cat would lick her kittens, but you can use a warm, moist cotton ball to gently rub the kittens' anal area to stimulate urination and defecation. Completely solid feces usually will not form while kittens are drinking formula. Start litter training at four weeks. Use a small litter box with non-clumping litter. Show kittens the litter box and put in a used cotton ball, and this should do the trick.
- **Health Concerns:**
Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) – Though this is common in kittens, you should not ignore it. If heavy yellow discharge develops or the kitten has trouble breathing or eating, see a

veterinarian immediately. A mild URI can be cleared up by simply wiping away discharge with a warm, wet cloth and keeping kittens in a warm, damp environment.

Fleas – Fleas on a very small kitten can cause anemia. First, pick fleas off with a flea comb. For a bad infestation, you can bathe the kitten in warm water to get rid of fleas, since using topical flea treatment can make small kittens ill. Remember, never submerge kittens fully in water. If giving a bath be careful of chilling – dry kittens thoroughly with a warm towel or hair dryer on low, then place on a heating pad. No shampoos or topical treatment should be used in kittens six weeks or younger.

Parasites/Diarrhea – Any drastic change in stool consistency can mean trouble. Parasites can often cause diarrhea, strange looking stool, and dehydration. If you notice any unusual signs, your kittens should be seen by a veterinarian.

3. How to Socialize Feral Kittens



Socialization techniques will help you prepare kittens to be placed for adoption. This can be a long, time-consuming process depending on the age and temperament of the kittens and should not be taken lightly.

- **Initial Confinement:** If you are dealing with a litter, separate each kitten if possible and if you can't, make sure you spend quality time alone with each one. Keep kittens in a small room, like a bathroom, or preferably in a cage where you will have easy access to them and they won't be able to hide in a hard-to-reach spot. Also keep them away from any other animals in the home. This small space will calm them and allow them to easily find their food, water, and litter. Allow them one hiding place for security, such as a box or carrier. Provide soft comfortable bedding. Consider leaving a radio or TV on when the kittens are alone to get used to human voices. For young kittens, a ticking clock wrapped in a towel sounds like a mother cat's heartbeat and is very soothing. Litters can be put back together after a short adjustment period.
- **Touch:** Safety first. Aggressive feral kittens can hurt you badly if you are not careful. Wear gloves or protective clothing if you feel it is needed. Hold kittens as much as possible after giving them an initial two-day adjustment period. If a kitten is feisty, papoose in a towel with only the head out and hold her while doing things around the house. Pet kittens by reaching from behind the head and gently rubbing around the face, chin, and behind the ears. Hold kittens while talking softly and petting for about 20 minutes at a time, and repeat this often throughout the day. All young kittens should be picked up often to be petted, brushed, and played with so they are used to this behavior when they grow up.
- **Feeding:** Food is the best tool for socialization. You may keep dry kitten food out all day, but when you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it. They will soon associate you with food and begin to trust you. If they are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage. After holding kittens, reward them with some canned cat food or chicken flavored baby food on a spoon.
- **Play:** Encourage kittens to play with toys at around three to four weeks. It is important that you don't let kittens play with your hand or bite or scratch you. This is especially important when raising single neonatal kittens without siblings.
- **Introductions to the home and others:** After kittens are comfortable enough with you to fall asleep on your lap or purr in your presence, they can move from the initial confinement space

to a larger, kitten-proof room. Introduce kittens to as many human friends as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.

When deciding what to do upon finding kittens, it is also important to think ahead for them. Can you provide them with a foster home? A permanent home? Will you have the time, resources, and energy to find these newly socialized kittens a home?

Depending on your initial decision, you will end up with either socialized, well-adjusted kittens who you can easily adopt out, or a colony with fully sterilized, vaccinated feral cats and kittens. Either decision is correct because, as you have read, taking on the task of raising kittens or socializing them is no easy feat. Be secure that you made the best choice for your circumstances and don't second guess yourself. Kittens can pull at our heart-strings, but in the end, doing what is best for you will ultimately be what is best for the kittens.