



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, naturally fear people. However, if they are caught and handled at a young age, they can become socialized and adopted into loving homes with just a little work, patience and some good, old-fashioned TLC.

In our experience, kittens under six weeks old can usually be socialized within a matter of days, and kittens six to 12 weeks old usually take anywhere from two to four weeks of intensive socialization to be tamed. Kittens 12 to 15 weeks old, and sometimes even a little older, can usually be tamed as well, but it will probably take a little longer and require more work. If you plan on socializing a kitten 16 weeks old or older, or an adult cat, you should probably plan on keeping the cat, and be prepared for the possibility that he 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. Normally we recommend that feral kittens 16 weeks old and up or adult feral cats be returned to their outdoor colony. If this is not possible, we'd recommend they be relocated to another suitable managed outdoor cat colony.

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

Before Bringing Them Inside

Some ways to gain the trust of the kittens and their mother is by feeding them on a schedule and engaging them in play using a wand toy, such as our favorites, the “cat dancer”, “cat charmer” 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 in or find another foster home, please plan on trapping the cats when they are old enough to be spayed/neutered (8 weeks/2 pounds at most clinics) and then return them to their colony. If you are going to take kittens away from their mother to socialize them, we recommend doing so no earlier than six weeks and no later than 10 weeks unless the mother is friendly and can be brought inside to nurse them until they are fully weaned. It can be difficult to accurately age kittens. The bottom line is that they should stay with their mother until they are fully eating canned food on their own.

Housing

After the kittens are inside, you will need to confine them in a large dog crate or similar cage. Cages can be borrowed from Tree House with a \$75 refundable deposit pending availability. 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, behind, or under, and remove anything breakable or that could injure them (basically, the room should be empty). The cage should be big enough to 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, small carrier or something similar to hide in or perch on top of is essential until they become less frightened of you. You may also want to cover or partially cover the cage with a blanket or sheet to help them 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

The number one goal of socialization is to get the kittens to approach you and others without fear, and eventually to let you or others pet them without running away, with the final goal being that they “ask” people for attention by approaching them. Many people try to hold the kittens right away and think that when this is accomplished that their work is done. It is important to note that many feral kittens will freeze up when being held, but this does not mean they are not afraid. It most likely means they are just too nervous to do anything about it. Therefore, for most kittens, it is important not to try to pet or hold them right away if they are very frightened. Eating in front of you and then from your hand and playing with you are the first things you need to do. Once you accomplish those two steps, then petting and handling can begin.

- **Meal Feeding and Spoon Feeding**

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 max per kitten). Leaving a large 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 or pieces of real meat are 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, then eating from a spoon you are holding in your hand, then out of your hand, and then for you to pet them while they are eating. Once you get that far, you can begin handling the kittens.**

- **Play Therapy**

Once the kittens are at least somewhat comfortable with your presence, play therapy should start. If you start waving a wand around too soon, they may get frightened. It is important to observe their reaction when playing to make sure they are not afraid. As mentioned above, wand toys like the “cat charmer”, “cat dancer”, “the sparkler”, and when they are out of the cage, “Da Bird” are all good tools (and are available for purchase at Tree House). Even when kittens are confined, a great game is to run the wand toys along the outside of the cage. The kittens love to paw at it between the bars. It is usually a good idea to start your socialization session with playing first. Then when they are tired out, you can feed them and then with their little bellies full, it is easier to move on to petting.

- **Petting and Handling**

Younger and less feral kittens can usually be handled right away. You might want to wear gloves at first, just in case. 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 hand 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 playing/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(s) 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. One thing we see often is that the kittens get socialized to their foster parent but are afraid of everyone else, so we want to stress the importance of this. Consider having a kitten party, where people can take turns handling the cats while chatting and socializing quietly or ask a neighbor to come by for a few minutes each day to feed the kittens.

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 kittens are playing on their own, 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. It is helpful to 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 his mother until he is weaned and eating food other than his mother's milk around four to six 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 at least six 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.