



To socialize or not to socialize? What to do with feral kittens.

Factors to consider:

Time: Do you have the time it takes to socialize kittens? You will have to commit to caring for them one-on-one for at least a couple of hours each day, for a period of a few weeks to a month or longer. Sadly, people often bring feral kittens into their home and then do not take the time to work with them. Weeks, or months, later, they realize that they cannot touch the cat—they have feral cats in their home that cannot be adopted.

Adoption Expertise and Connections: After socializing the kittens, they will need adoptive homes. Do you have the network—friends, acquaintances, organizations—to help you find those homes? Finding and screening homes for kittens takes work. Consider, as well, your ability to get the kittens neutered before adoption when deciding whether to socialize them or not. Adopting them to new homes unaltered may just continue the cycle of unplanned and unwanted kittens.

Kitten Age: Healthy kittens four months of age or older can stay in their colony. These kittens should be neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their outdoor home. **We can help** – this is what our Community Cats Program does.

You've decided to socialize the kittens....

Feral *cats* are not socialized to people—and can't be adopted. With some time and attention, however, you can work with young feral *kittens* to help them become affectionate and loving companions. It's not a transformation that happens overnight—socializing kittens is a big commitment—but it's a very rewarding experience.

Kittens who do not have any contact with humans after they are born will be feral, regardless of whether their mother is a lost house cat or a feral cat living in a colony. They will be frightened of people and demonstrate all of the signs of fear and anxiety that an adult cat would, like spitting, hissing, and running from human contact.

To become pets, they will need to be socialized, or taught to be comfortable around people. If the kittens are eight weeks or younger, usually just about anyone can socialize them by following some simple steps. Kittens older than two months (eight weeks) of age often take more time and skill to socialize. Socializing kittens is a big responsibility, but with patience and effort, your hissing feral kitten can become the cat who curls up on your lap for some cuddling. Follow these tips to get organized and gather all the supplies you need.

Confinement

Keep kittens in a room that can be closed off, like a bathroom or spare bedroom. Set up a cage for them inside the room. This will give you easy access and won't give them an opportunity to hide in a hard-to-reach

spot. This small space will also calm them and allow them to easily find their food, water, and litter, while keeping any pets or small children away.

Provide a safe zone—or 'den' (such as a small box with blankets or a feral cat den)—in the kittens' cage. This hiding place provides security, and gives them a way to feel comfortable and not threatened. Kittens must feel relaxed in your home.

Use the proper cage to confine your kittens. If they are extremely small, use nylon cages—not wire—so they can't escape through bars. The cage should be large enough to hold the den, food and water dishes, a litter box, and soft, comfortable bedding.

Make sure that room is kitten-proofed, so if they get out of your hands, they will still be safe. You don't want them to be able to crawl under doorways or furniture or into vents—anywhere that is difficult for you to reach, or is dangerous for them.

Socialization

Give kittens an initial two-day adjustment period after trapping before you begin holding them.

Set the kittens' crate up off floor so they feel more comfortable. Felines feel safer if they are higher and not at ground level.

Don't keep the kittens confined away from the household action. Leave a TV or radio on after the kittens have been in your home for a few days, so they become accustomed to human voices and sounds. For young kittens, a ticking clock wrapped in a towel sounds like a mother cat's heartbeat and is very soothing.

Kittens will respond to positive experiences. Reward positive behaviors and prevent negative experiences like scolding or confrontations with other pets.

Gauge each kitten's ability to learn and become accustomed to you. Evaluate each individually—don't go by set rules.

Spitting, hissing, and hiding are all expressions of fear; be patient and do not mistake these signs for aggression.

If a litter of kittens are slow to socialize, consider separating them. Isolating the kittens forces them to rely on people. If you can't, make sure you spend quality time alone with each one. Litters can be put back together after a short adjustment period.

Food is the key to socialization. Providing the kitten with food creates an incentive for the kitten to interact with you and forms a positive association, ensuring that she connects you with the food she loves so much.

You may keep dry kitten food out all day. When you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it, so they associate you with food and begin to trust you. If the kittens are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage.

Over time, gradually move the food plate closer to your body while you sit in the room, until the plate is in your lap and the kittens are comfortable crawling on you to get to it.

Pet and handle the kittens for the first time while they are eating, so they have an incentive to stay put. Start petting around the face, chin, and behind the ears and work up to petting all over.

Gradually work up to holding kittens, making sure to reward them with some canned cat food or chicken-flavored baby food on a spoon. Human baby food, especially chicken flavor, is a special incentive for kittens. (Make sure the baby food has no onion—it's toxic to cats.)

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.

If you haven't separated the kittens, take time to socialize each of them individually. Handling them away from the group can speed up the socialization process by making them more dependent on you.

Devote about two hours per day for successful socialization. You can do a few long sessions or several shorter sessions.

Get down to the kittens' level and play with them; particularly kittens eight weeks and younger.

Hold the kittens as much as possible. Make sure they are close to your body so they feel your body warmth and heart beat. This is especially productive after they have eaten, so they associate you with the food and the cuddles.

Use toys to entice kittens to play at around three to four weeks.

If a kitten is particularly feisty, burrito (or papoose) her in a towel with only the head out and hold her while doing things around the house for ten minutes a few times daily.

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 people as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.

Precautions

Even a scratch from a kitten can hurt. Make sure you know how to properly handle feisty kittens!

Aggressive feral kittens can hurt you badly if you are not careful. Wear gloves or protective clothing if you feel it is needed.

You may need to scruff kittens by the back of their neck to gain control. Learn how to safely scruff a kitten as shown in the photo. Use your entire hand and gently but firmly grasp the fur on back of neck without pinching, pull the cat up, and immediately support her hind legs.

Do not use toxic cleaning products or leave them in the room with kittens, including Lysol®, and wet wipes.

If kittens are in your bathroom, pull the shower curtain up and out of the way, so they don't climb it.

Do not allow very young children to play with or help socialize the kittens. They are not old enough to understand and react to the temperament and behavior of feral kittens.