
Taming Feral Kittens

Feral cat colonies usually originate when lost or abandoned unaltered domestic cats congregate near a food source, such as garbage dumpsters in alleyways, behind restaurants and food shops, behind hospital, military and college cafeterias, and in parks, where there is a food source left by picnickers. Female cats will find a safe, hidden place to give birth and old instincts inherited from her wild cousin, the African Wildcat (*Felis lybica*) will reappear.

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 adversaries. The tiny kittens will spit and hiss if approached by humans, and though small, will bite and scratch if not handled with respect for their wild natures. Remember that when dealing with feral cats, as with any wild animal, you should have a pre-exposure rabies vaccination and take care to keep your tetanus shots 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. Some females have three litters each year, with a gestation period of approximately 65 days. Cats, like many wild animals, overproduce to ensure survival of the species, thus feral cats have many kittens.

Kitten mortality rates are usually very high—over 50% among kittens. Many become sick from usually curable diseases, such as respiratory infections, but without medical treatment, the weak kittens usually perish. Those cats surviving the first six to eight weeks often build up immunities to common cat diseases, and once controlled and stabilized, a colony remains healthy and viable for many years under the care and supervision of caretakers.

Feral felines may become stressed when in captivity. Stress can cause illness and a mother's inability to properly care for kittens, especially when giving birth. If problems occur, such as her inability to tear open the amniotic sac to expel the kitten, she will not allow you to do this

and the kitten will die. You should provide a box or container in the cage for the mother cat to hide in to feel safe.

Introduction: aspects of TNR vs. taming to consider

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 trap the kittens when they are 8 to 12 weeks old, sterilize, vaccinate, and return to the colony. Even at the young age of 12 weeks old, many kittens may be difficult to tame and socialize, and by returning them to the colony you will not be using up valuable adoptive homes.

The Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine notes that there are four critical stages of kitten development. The socialization period is from between 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. 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."

Remember that it is also important for kittens to remain with their littermates for as long as possible. Difficult decisions have to be made then, when deciding to remove feral kittens for taming and socialization.

Many feral kittens, even if they have not been socialized during the critical period, 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.

Be sure to trap and spay/neuter the kittens' parents so the breeding cycle does not continue. The mother cat should have stopped nursing at least ten days prior to surgery. Be sure to tell the veterinarian that the cat was recently nursing.

If you do wish to rescue abandoned kittens or to tame feral kittens, develop a foster care program and get others involved. Give your volunteers some basic training such as ACA's "Neonatal Kitten Care Booklet."

ACA strongly advises that kittens be spayed/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%.

Catching feral kittens

Kittens will make themselves visible when they are about four to five weeks old, once they begin eating solid food. Alley Cat Allies recommends capturing kittens between the ages of five and eight weeks, when they are developed enough to leave their mother but still young enough to be tamed. They will be hard to catch! They hide in all kinds of inaccessible places. ACA recommends using baited traps for safe handling of feral kittens. They may look sweet and innocent (and they are!) but one should remember they are wild animals even though they may look like any domestic kitten. They have wild natures and have been taught by their mothers to defend themselves with teeth and claws.

Orphaned or young kittens

If kittens are under five weeks of age and unable to eat solid food, bottle-feed them with kitten formula (KMR or Similac) obtained from veterinary clinics or pet supply stores. Cow's milk does not contain enough fat or protein for kittens. Young kittens should be kept in a box lined with absorbent paper towels. Keep the box warm (around 90 degrees F.) during the first two weeks of life, using a heating pad covered with a towel, or an infrared lamp. 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 from an eye dropper. Massage the belly to stimulate digestion, and use a cotton ball or paper towel to stimulate elimination of urine and feces. 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 weeks old. Mix canned kitten food with kitten formula and hand feed until the

kittens are accustomed to eating on their own, then gradually change over completely to canned food.

Nearly all feral and stray kittens have internal parasites and the kittens need to be dewormed by a veterinarian. Any upper respiratory infections should be treated with antibiotics and eye ointments. Left untreated, they can cause severe health problems, pneumonia, eventual blindness or even death. For more detailed information see, *Neonatal Kitten Care* available from Alley Cat Allies.

If you do not have kitten formula on hand (KMR –Kitten Milk Replacement available at your local pet store) use the following formula for a **temporary feeding only (12-24 hours)**. Add one egg yolk to eight ounces of cow's milk for short term feeding. 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.

One of the most important things to remember is to keep the orphan kitten warm.

The taming process

Kittens may be taken from the mother after weaning, at approximately five to six weeks old. The process of taming kittens can take two to six 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. Be cautious when you work with ferals. 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 long sleeves. Keep gloves handy. If one escapes from confinement, do not grab the kitten with your bare hands. Use the gloves or a throw a towel over the kitten, or push him into a corner with a carrier, so that he has no other choice but to enter the carrier. A special net, available from ACES, is handy in instances like this.

If you do get bitten, wash the wound immediately with soap and water for five minutes, and seek medical advice. Remember to tell the doctor that you will quarantine the kitten for ten days, an adequate time for determining if the kitten has rabies. (See ACA's Rabies Factsheet.)

Scratches are usually less likely to become infected, but need to be cleaned carefully as well. If you cannot catch an escaped kitten or cat, withhold food and set a trap.

Summary of the taming process:

1. Containment in cage;
2. Periodic and brief handling with protective towel;
3. Containment in small room;
4. Exposure to other humans to help with socialization;
5. Feed with baby food on a teaspoon or on your finger (do not feed baby food with onion in the ingredients);
6. And, placement in suitable adoptive home as soon as possible to get the kitten used to their new environments.

Containment in cage

A feral kitten is usually frightened at first and may hiss and spit at humans. Begin the taming process by confining the kitten in a cage/carrier in a small room and for the first day do not attempt to handle the kitten. Feral kittens must first learn to feel safe. Visit frequently and talk to the kitten to get him used to your voice. Get him used to human voices by leaving a television set on low volume. Always move slowly. Leave a radio playing soft music in the room.

Feed kittens moist cat food and leave dry kitten chow out at all times. If the kittens are still small or undernourished, pour some KMR kitten milk over the moist food.

Handling feral kittens

After two days select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel quietly but firmly over the kitten's body (do not cover his head) and pick him up. If the kitten stays calm, pet 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. If the kitten remains calm, grip securely by the skin at the nape of the neck, put the towel on your lap, and set the kitten on the towel. Stroke the kitten's body while speaking in soft, reassuring tones, then relax your grip. Make this first physical contact brief. Go through this process with each kitten, and give him/her a special treat after all have been handled. Repeat this process as frequently as possible. Comb and brush the kitten gently as well. You can also offer the kitten baby food on your

finger to get him used to your hands. Make sure there is no onion in the ingredients. Onions are toxic to cats.

Containment in small room

Within a week the kittens should have made considerable progress. Remember that each kitten will develop at a different rate. They should then have open access to the room and be placed in the cage only if necessary. Any kittens who do not seem to be taming should be placed in a separate cage in another room away from the others. This will allow you to work with the kitten more frequently and will increase dependence on a human. It will also prevent perpetuation of wildness in littermates. In some litters, it will become obvious that they are reinforcing wildness in the group. Each member must be then isolated from the other.

Exposure to other humans and other cats

If the feral kitten can be around another calm, friendly cat, this will help the taming process. Kittens are “copy-cats” and will follow the tame cats’ behavior, coming over to be petted if they hear the tamer cat purring while being petted. Give frequent treats by hand, and teach them to play with cat toys, such as the *Cat Dancer* or *Cat Charmer*. Interaction with humans during play can hasten the taming process and is highly recommended.

If you have to medicate, use liquid medicine in moist food, or crush tablets into baby food (the meat variety without onion). Forcing tablets into a feral cat or kitten may cause trauma and can undo the taming process. When the kittens no longer respond by biting, encourage friends to handle them as often as possible. Socialization with other humans is very important. However as stated before, feral kittens (or feral cats) tend to bond with one human so they adjust to a new home better if they have also socialized with other humans.

Placement in adoptive home

Some people are afraid to tell adopters that the kittens are feral, for fear they will not be placed. Alley Cat Allies believes this is not in the best interest of the kitten. The cats or kittens may retain some feral instincts. People’s perceptions about feral cats need to change. Education is important, and people have to be made aware of the millions of feral cats living in alleys who need our understanding and our help, not fear and disdain.

Kittens do best if there are no small children in the home. A child's normal activity and noise can easily reverse all the work you have done. 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 ferals 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.

If you place a feral kitten in a new home after the taming process, ACA strongly recommends that the new guardian read this fact sheet and go through a similar "mini-taming" process, because the new home can be very confusing and traumatic for a feral kitten. Most will soon settle down happily into their new environment and start enjoying the luxuries offered!

Early-age sterilization

Because cats can reproduce before they are five to six months old, many shelters and veterinarians concerned about the killing of millions of healthy animals in U.S. shelters are recommending early-age sterilization. Kittens can be safely sterilized from eight weeks old. If proper procedures are followed, they recover from the surgery much quicker than older cats. Often, people who adopt kittens from shelters do not have the animals altered, and they are allowed to reproduce, adding to the severe crisis of cat overpopulation. Feral colonies are the result of individuals who allow their unaltered cats to roam and mate with other unaltered outdoor cats.

Kitten Health

Neonatal kittens

The neonatal, or infantile, period in a kitten's life extends from birth through the first 10 days of life. A large number of people care for abandoned and orphaned kittens, many of which are in the neonatal stage. Alley Cat Allies has several resources available, such as the Neonatal Kitten Care book. For those who look after orphaned kittens,

this book provides detailed information on the steps involved with raising orphaned kittens.

The importance of first milk

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. Normally, kittens should receive their first vaccinations at eight to ten weeks of age when they lose their maternally derived immunity.

Infectious diseases (FeLV and FIV)

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 starting at two to three weeks of age. In unvaccinated populations, feline distemper is a very deadly disease.

There is no evidence to suggest that feral cats are any more likely to be infected with FeLV or feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) than domesticated cats.

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)

This virus belongs to the Coronaviridae family and is a complex disease that affects cats, including exotic species such as lions, cougars, and cheetahs. The presence of antibodies does not prove that a cat has FIP. Only a biopsy or necropsy (autopsy) can confirm the diagnosis. Many cats may have been exposed to the coronavirus and will therefore develop antibodies. FIP is responsible for a small percentage of kitten mortality. Early symptoms such as loss of appetite, weight loss, and mild upper respiratory infection are similar to those for other diseases. Fever, which may fluctuate, may be a sign of FIP. Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine reports that most FIP cases come from crowded shelters or catteries.

Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)

Perhaps the biggest health problem for kittens in colonies and for abandoned neonatal kittens is upper respiratory infections. Many other diseases, such as FIV and FeLV, can begin with URI. Several respiratory diseases also cause sneezing, coughing, and nasal discharge, making URIs difficult to diagnose and treat. The most probable causes are rhinotracheitis and calicivirus. Often the disease becomes chronic and sometimes cannot be completely cured. The cat may sneeze or have runny eyes for most of his life.

Providing a warm environment, cleaning the eyes and nose areas, and using a vaporizer can treat a mild case. Antibiotics will not help URI, but are sometimes used to combat secondary infections. Conjunctivitis of the eyes requires constant cleaning with moist, warm cotton balls and application of Terramycin or Chlorasone, a few times a day directly in the eyes.

Internal parasites

The most common internal parasites are roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, Giardia, and Coccidia. Parasites can cause loss of appetite, diarrhea, and anemia. A veterinarian should examine a stool sample to determine what medications to administer.

External parasites

Earmites and fleas on kittens must be treated. Contact your veterinarian about the best and safest methods. Remember that a kitten can die from anemia caused by fleas. Fleas can also cause tapeworms, which should be treated.

Keep food areas clean, especially during the hot, humid months. If you have a problem with flies, you may want to feed dry food only and remove all food dishes after feeding.