

Taming Feral Kittens

Homeless cats are common in most communities, and often live unnoticed lives in our neighborhoods, business districts and rural areas. While many people can ignore adult cats, kittens are irresistible and their presence draws attention to these colonies. What do you do when you hear about homeless cats and kittens? More and more communities around the world are turning to TNR. Trap-Neuter-Return. While this is a great solution to feline over-population, many people choose to keep the kittens to tame and re-home. There are three advantages to removing kittens from a colony.

- It keeps the colony size manageable. This makes feeding easier and helps reduce the nuisance factor of a large colony on the human neighbors. A smaller colony is more likely to be tolerated by nearby homes and businesses.
- It improves the quality of life of the kittens.
- It reduces competition for food and shelter among the remaining cats.

Feral Kitten Checklist: Making the Decision to Socialize or TNR?

Do the kittens have a safe place to return with adequate food and shelter?	Yes	No
Is there a colony caretaker who will take responsibility for the cats after you have TNR'd the site?	Yes	No
Do you have the time, space and financial resources to work with the kittens long term?	Yes	No
Is there a plan in place for the kittens that don't tame down? [The window of time for returning them is small.]	Yes	No

What are some of the drawbacks to taming feral kittens?

- Compared to tame kittens, feral kittens often require much more work before they can be successfully placed in homes. Depending on the age and temperament of the kittens, it can take weeks or even months to socialize them adequately for home placement.
- Some feral kittens remain shy or skittish for life. While they do well with their families, they have more difficulty adjusting to re-homing later in life. As a result, more time and care must be invested in finding them a lifetime home.
- Like people, kittens have different personalities. Some tame quickly and others never come around. This can be true even in a single litter. One or two will tame down quickly while a littermate will retain its feral nature. Taming is a gamble. If one or two of them don't tame down, and you've had them for weeks or months, they **can't** go back to their colonies.

If foster space and financial resources are limited, it may make more sense to focus on tame kittens that can be altered and placed into homes much faster. Don't feel bad if you have to TNR kittens. Remember, you have vastly improved their quality of life just by having them altered!

*Note: Many cats benefit from socialization, even if they will never be placed in a home. In a managed colony, it is easier to feed and assess the health of cats and kittens that are visible. If you are caring for adult cats or kittens in a colony, work on acclimating them so they are comfortable with your presence. Make consistent sounds when feeding so they associate you with food. Shake the bag, tap a spoon on a bowl or call to the cats so they learn to come to these sounds. A feral mom will bring her babies out sooner if she feels safe. This is important because you can catch and socialize the kittens at a younger age.



Note: Kitten age is often given as the determining factor in whether kittens can be tamed or not. Some articles will say that it is very difficult to tame kittens over 9 to 12 weeks of age. While it is true that younger is better, there are few hard and fast rules. We have seen 6 week old kittens resist socialization for months, and 16 old kittens surprise us by becoming tame in a week or two. Whether it is genetics or the prior human experiences of these kittens, they are all individuals and some of the older ones do tame down. When possible, it is best to assess kittens individually rather than using their age as the determining factor.

Things to consider before returning a kitten to its colony.

1. How long has the kitten been fostered? Kittens are more likely to adjust and be accepted by other cats in the colony if they are returned soon after TNR. Returning within two weeks is ideal. If it must be longer, you may need to acclimate the kitten in a relocation pen.
2. Where has the kitten been fostered? If the kitten has been fostered inside a heated home during fall or winter, releasing him outside in cold temperatures is cruel. If you aren't sure whether a kitten will tame down, consider fostering it in an unheated room or garage so it will be easier to transition back outside. Or, provide a heated outdoor bed in a relocation pen as you introduce him to back to his new home.
3. Have there been any changes to the colony or environment? The kitten is most likely to readjust successfully if he has familiar littermates or other colony members there. The location of food and shelter should also be the same as it was before he was trapped.

Taming

There are 4 main steps in the socialization of kittens.

- Containment
- Acclimatization
- Touch
- Socialization

Containment

The first and most important step to socializing feral kittens is **containment**. Feral kittens instinctively know that they are safer if they are hidden and this behavior becomes a habit over time. Remember, the kittens see you as a potential predator. As they hide, this behavior becomes reinforced. **You can't tame a hidden kitten!** So, step one is to contain the kittens so they can't run and hide. For most people, this means a cage or small bathroom. If you turn them loose in your house or in a larger room with hiding places, you will literally add months to the process.

If you choose a small bathroom, first check it for hiding spots. Many cabinets have an open space underneath and if they slip into this tiny space, you may have to remove the front of your cabinet to extract them.

If you choose a cage, be sure to have the cage in a closed space so you can capture them again if they slip out the door. We do not recommend taming kittens in outdoor cages. If they escape, you may have difficulty re-trapping them. Outside cages are also at greater risk of tampering by neighbors or kids who don't understand why the kittens are caged. In small cages, raccoons and other predators can sometimes reach in and injure or even kill the kittens.

Set up the space so it is comfortable for the kittens. Include soft bedding, toys, litter box and food and water. Place the food and water away from the litter box. It is often better to start with towels or scraps of fleece for the bedding so they can be easily washed. Save the cute cat bed for later when they are used to the litter box.



If possible, place the cage on a counter or table or add a cat tree. Kittens are more frightened of you if you are looming above them. Getting them up closer to eye level will often speed up their socialization process.

Acclimatization

Acclimatization begins as soon as you have the kittens contained. Slowly introduce the sights and sounds of a home. This includes; talking, radio, television, pets, water, plumbing. Begin with quieter sounds and slower movements in the first few days. Place a radio or mp3 player nearby and choose a quiet radio talk show or audiobook to play. Watch their reactions as you add more sounds. Turn on the faucets, flush toilets and add noisy toys as they begin to tolerate more sounds.

Kittens acclimate faster if you are directly involved in all their feeding. The kittens will tame down faster if they are only fed when you are present. If the kittens are older are proving difficult to socialize, this is critical. Some people choose to keep dry food out all the time, but reserve canned food or treats for when they are present. Others prefer to remove all food when they are absent and provide 2 or 3 supervised meals. Whichever you choose, make sure to speak to the kittens and remain in the room for most or all of the meal so they come to associate you with meals.

Most kittens like canned food, but if you want to speed things up, consider adding chicken or pureed baby foods like Gerber's chicken or turkey. (Be sure to choose the type without onions added.) You can start off by offering it on a long handled spoon. As they get calmer, move your hand down the handle closer to the spoon. When they get braver, you can put the food on your finger and let them lick it off. But use caution if you do this as an enthusiastic eater can mistake your finger for the meat. If you yell "ouch!" and pull away quickly, you can undo several days of taming. Later, as kittens come to associate this treat with your fingers, they will approach you to sniff. Start off by rewarding every sniff with a treat. Later, you can reward them with a scratch on the cheek.

As the kittens progress, consider moving them to an area with more human activity. Dens, kitchens and dining areas are all good places to consider. If you don't have a cage, consider borrowing a large cage or a dog exercise pen with a lid. To reduce the risk of disease transmission, be sure that both the kittens and any resident cats are healthy and up to date on vaccines before moving them into the same space.

Touching

You may begin introducing the kittens to touch right away if they are very young or used to some human contact. Older kittens or kittens who are demonstrating their terror by hissing, growling or frantically searching for a hiding spot, may need a few days to settle in before you start this step. Go slow and read their body language carefully as you assess their level of fear and tolerance for touch. How scared is the kitten?

Relaxed Kittens

- Lying on their sides with legs outstretched
- Ears and whiskers will be forward
- Paws may be flexing or kneading the air

A kitten that appears relaxed may flinch or tense up as you reach for them, but this will improve with repeated handling and the continued use of food.

Tense and Fearful Kittens

- Lying, sitting or standing with legs underneath them.
- Ears and whiskers may be partially back
- Tail will be tucked under or close to the body
- Eyes will be open wide and the pupils may be dilated

A tense kitten is ready for handling, but go slow and watch for clues of fear and terror. Lure them to you with food or toys. Pick them up frequently and reward with treats and gentle petting.

Terrified Kittens

- Body is in a crouched, ready-to-run posture
- Kitten may demonstrate its terror by hissing or lunging.
Inexperienced people will sometimes misinterpret this behavior as meanness or aggression. It is an instinctive, self-protective behavior designed to scare away predators.
- Head is either even to body or close to the ground
- Tail is tucked under body or low to ground
- Whiskers and ears are back
- Pupils are dilated

Terrified kittens may need more work before handling. Try to reduce their stress by offering food and sharing their space for longer periods of time. Some kittens will calm down if you play the sound of purring. *Check the website for a 5 minute purring mp3.

To begin, it is often good to start with a long feather or soft toy. Speak softly and avoid direct eye contact. Slowly stroke the kitten with the object and observe their reactions to see how much they can tolerate. If they seem terrified, keep the sessions short and provide a treat at the conclusion. If you use a wand-style toy, move slowly at first. Drag the toy slowly past the kitten and twitch it slowly if they show any interest.



Many kittens will be too scared to play for the first few days or even weeks, but it is good for them to get used to the new objects and movements. Alternate play times with occasional touch and lots of treats.

It is a good idea to begin handling as soon as possible. Sometimes, this will happen naturally. You may be feeding a kitten by hand and lure it on your lap, or it may chase a laser pointer or toy over your leg. While it is concentrating on eating, you may sneak a few pets. Other times, you may need to hasten this step by using a towel or gloves to hold the kitten. Remember to avoid direct eye contact. Wrap the kitten gently in a towel and hold it in your lap. If you can tempt the kitten to lick cat food or pureed chicken off your finger, that is even better. Make these sessions brief to start and lengthen them as they become braver. Read a couple pages of a book, sing a soft song or talk to the kitten for a while before returning her to the safe spot. Repeat this frequently throughout the day.

*Many kittens relax when they hear the sound of purring. Play the purring mp3 when you feed them. Later, as the association with the purring and food is strengthened, pet them while they are eating. As they progress, play the sounds while they are getting attention.

Socialization

Now that the kittens have begun to acclimate to life with humans and have started to tolerate some handling, it is time to introduce them to other people and other animals. You have taught them that **you** are safe, but kittens won't transfer these new "people skills" to strange humans. Since the goal is to get these kittens into a home, your next step is to beg, bribe or even pay friends and neighbors to handle, feed and interact with the kittens. It is common to have one or two kittens in a litter lag behind the others in socializing. If one kitten in the litter isn't socializing at the same rate, it may be necessary to separate it from its littermates for a few days. Separation from the littermates seems cruel, but can often result in a rapid turn-around. Removing the shy ones can also benefit the tamer kittens. Seeing their littermate behave in a defensive or terrified manner can hold them back. A brave kitten that is starting to approach humans, may hear a shy littermate hiss and then dash for safety. Finally, it is often a good idea to move kittens to a new foster home at this stage so they can learn to adapt to new people and environments.

Since many adopters have other pets, it is important to provide positive socialization opportunities with other animals. Consult with your veterinarian or someone knowledgeable before allowing interaction between unrelated cats. At the very least, the kittens should have been isolated from other cats for a couple weeks, started on vaccines, treated for fleas and worms and tested for leukemia. If you have a cat friendly dog, consider some carefully supervised interactions. Having either the dog or the kittens in a playpen is a good idea. Feed them both in each other's presence. Allow them to sniff each other, but don't force interaction. One bad experience with a dog may leave the kitten forever fearful of canines. It is better to skip this step if there is any question about how your dog will react.

As socialization progresses, you may choose to move the kitten to a larger environment. For example, you may want to move them from a cage to a small bathroom. As the kittens adjust to their larger space, avoid trying to grab or catch the kitten. The instinct to avoid predators is strong, and if the kitten associates you with fear and running away, all that hard work will be lost. Lure the kitten to you with toys or food.

How do you know when your kitten is making progress?

Taming feral kittens is very rewarding, but it can be discouraging when you don't see progress right away. Every litter is different, but you can expect the process to take several weeks or even several months. Here are some signs that you are making progress.

- Purring
- Eye contact
- Approaching you for food or attention
- Playing in front of you
- Eating or using the litter box in front of you
- Walking with ears forward and tail up
- Meowing
- Rolling onto side or back when you are in their space
- Paws kneading
- Tolerating being held or picked up

Sometimes kittens will seem to regress if moved to a new environment. A kitten that appeared completely tame in a cage may hide and act skittish when placed in a larger room. Go slow and allow the kitten to adjust and feel safe by repeating some of the steps you followed earlier.

How long does it take?

Kittens vary, so don't be discouraged if you aren't seeing rapid progress. It can often take 4 – 8 weeks or more. Look for signs of progress each week. Don't give up! If it seems hopeless, call or email someone who has worked with feral kittens. Sometimes it helps just to hear someone reassure you that this is normal.



What if the kitten never socializes enough to be considered adoptable?

Some people choose to adopt semi-feral kittens as “special needs” kittens. Others will reintroduce them to their colony. If several weeks have elapsed, they may need to be confined in a cage as they acclimate. If that isn't possible, long term placement in a garage or barn paired with other semi-feral cats is possible. See our barn relocation information before trying this option.

Adoption

Once your kittens are socialized, spayed / neutered, vaccinated and microchipped, they are ready for adoption. Here are some tips to make the adoption successful.

1. Most kittens will revert a little when placed in a new home, so it is very important that new adopters or foster parents **keep the kitten confined in a small area** until it is approaching humans for attention. This will be at least a week or two. Failure to follow this step may cause the kitten to hide and become less socialized and will add weeks or even months to the adjustment period.
2. Consider pairing a shy kitten with a well-socialized kitten. People are more likely to tolerate and keep a shy one if they have a friendly and social one. Also, the tame kitten will be a good role model for the shy one.
3. Send the kitten off with a favorite toy and treats to help the new adopters bond with the new kitten.
4. Check in with the adopters periodically to see how they are doing. If the adopters are expressing disappointment in their progress, reassure them that it will take a while. If they aren't keeping the kitten contained or seem unhappy with the kitten, it may be best to encourage them to choose a more confident kitten.
5. Reinforce with adopters that you will take the cat back at any time in the future. This safety net is perhaps the biggest gift you can give to a kitten that you have cared for a socialized. It is difficult to have cats returned months or years later, but if the adopters know that you will take them back without judgment, you may prevent them from ending up in a public shelter or abandoned.



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