

SOCIALIZING FERAL KITTENS

By Mike Phillips

Kittens under 8 weeks can usually be socialized without much difficulty following the guidelines detailed below. Kittens over 8 weeks of age who've had no positive interaction with humans often take much longer to socialize. However, these same guidelines are often effective up to 6 months and often even with adult ferals. (Learn about medicating feral kittens.)

Location – The best place to socialize kittens is anywhere where the socializer can get on their same level and comfortably interact with the kittens without the kittens feeling “backed into a corner,” or hiding out of reach. A dog pen large enough for the socializer to enter can be set up in any room and has the added advantage of more frequent exposure to typical human activity if placed in a busy room of the house. Most bathrooms work very well although they are isolated from continual household activity. A small room without hiding spots under couches and beds or behind furniture can also work very well. Radio and television sounds can contribute to getting outdoor ferals accustomed to the indoor environment.

Small cages or carriers don't work well since the cats always feel cornered when we reach in and they have no room to make the important “mind shift” where they decide to approach us out of self-interest in order to get the food they desire. They need to have the option not to be near you in order to make that decision to approach. We have some limited equipment information on where to obtain traps, handling gloves and socialization pens.



CATS SOCIALIZE THEMSELVES BY CHOICE! We only provide the incentive...FOOD.

FOOD is the most important tool to facilitate the socialization process. Growing kittens have an insatiable appetite which will give them the courage to approach you and be touched when they might normally never allow you anywhere near them. Putting food down and walking away takes away any incentive for them to welcome you into their world.

The following guidelines are not hard fast rules. You may find that the kittens skip to advanced stages very quickly or you may find they follow a sequence of their own design.

Evaluation - If the kittens are healthy, using the litter box, and will eat in front of you, you can safely begin delaying meals just enough to give you the advantage of hunger. (If not, you may decide to give them a “free ride” until this situation stabilizes. Once they seem calmer or the vet gives the OK, you may begin the “tough love” stage of socialization where you space out the meals so that the kittens are eager to learn.)

Tough love – Never put food down and walk away. If the kittens will eat in your presence, progressively pull the dish as close to you as possible. Stay with the kittens until they have eaten and then take the food away with you when you leave. Always leave water of course.

Eating off your finger - When the kittens are eating from a dish right beside you, start offering something tasty off your finger. Gerber or Beechnut baby food are favorites in Turkey, Chicken or Beef flavors. You may want to try this in place of step 2 if they won't

move close to you to eat from the dish. The order is of no importance as long as they are improving on some level. Be flexible but don't let them hold you hostage at the stage of their choice. “Get tough,” and make them work for it.

Lead them onto your lap – Once they are used to eating off your finger, use that to lead them up into contact with your body by their choice. You can also try putting a dish in your lap and let the entire litter climb up onto you to eat. The braver ones will start and the shy ones may need to be worked with individually at their level. Lead the braver ones as close as possible and see if they will make eye contact with you while licking from your finger. That's a biggie for them!

Initiate Contact – Initiate contact at the beginning of a session where the kittens are particularly hungry and eagerly engrossed in eating. Start with them eating from a dish or while eating off the finger and eventually

progress to touching them and petting while they are in your lap eating. Start in the head and shoulder area only. If s/he runs off lure them back with baby food on the finger and any bad experience should be soon forgotten. (This approach works at any stage. Back up to a stage that they've mastered and work back up to where they "freaked-out." Don't stop the session until they've forgotten the bad experience and are happily doing one of the steps with which they feel comfortable.)

Preparation for lifting – Expand petting and touching around the head and shoulders by moving to touching the underbelly to desensitize them for being picked up. Also try nudging them from one side to the other while they are engrossed in eating. Just having your hands near them and gently pushing them around is an important preparation to being picked up.

Moving on the ground - Set up two dishes and gently scoot a kitten the short distance from one dish to the other. If the kitten is engrossed in eating s/he won't mind being lifted if it goes smoothly and quickly. If not, lure 'em back, back up and start over.

Picking them up – Start sitting on the floor. Have a full jar of baby food opened and ready before you try the first pick-up. Try it when they are engrossed in eating right next to you rather than scrambling after them on the run. Lift them under their chest with the food right in front of them. Hold them as loosely as possible onto your knees and eventually to your chest. Young kittens are often reassured if they feel the warmth of your body and can feel your heart beat when held against your chest. If it works you can try it up onto your knees the next day and eventually standing up.

Handling w/o food - After a good long session where the kitten(s) are very full and getting

sleepy, try gentle petting and work up to holding and petting without the incentive of food being present. If this works you should be able to try it at other times between meals. It may be hardest just before feeding when the kittens are very hungry and confused and stressed by being held when they have only food on their minds.

Transition to adoption -Before putting them in a cage in an adoption center, test them with a few different socializers. If the volunteers at the adoption center can continue the baby food training there is often a smooth transition. Older and especially shy kittens do better when they go directly to an adoption and bypass the adoption center altogether. A crash course in socializing for the adopting family may be needed to assure that the transition to the home goes well. If the adopter starts them in the bathroom rather than turning the kittens loose to the run of the house, it will assure that they can bond with the kittens and that the kittens will know where the litter box is. If not the kittens often run off under the couch to hide for the foreseeable future.

Interactive Play – most feral kittens are frightened by interactive play when first exposed to humans. There is no rule for when to introduce it, or when they will accept it, but the best way to start is with a toy which isn't too threatening. A string on the end of a stick or some toy that allows you entice them from a distance allows them to get involved with your game without being face to face with you.

Save baby food (or whatever proves to be their favorite food) as a reward for new steps or to break through a plateau. Once a step has been mastered, only offer regular food as a reward for that step saving special treats for new territory. Remember the Mantra is "tough love."

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