

Adopting Abandoned Kittens

So what do you do if you find a litter of cats in your backyard? Don't panic! Read on.

First determine if the kittens you have found are truly abandoned. Feral moms not only have to take care of their kittens but also need to find food for them, so make sure that the mother cat is not simply out hunting before you take her kittens away. You can also take a closer look at the kittens: are they clean, quiet, and seemingly well-fed? If so, they are most likely being treated well, and mom is simply off doing her other duties. However if they are crying, skinny and dirty, then it is possible that they have been abandoned. If so, you should most definitely take them home or bring them to a local shelter to give them a fighting chance at survival.



Kittens are supposed to stay with their mother until they are at least 10-12 weeks old for many reasons. Before they are fully weaned, which occurs by about the 6th week of life, they drink milk from their mother. By doing this they receive passive immunity from the mother. This protects them from disease and illness temporarily until their immune systems are strong enough to protect them. The mother also nurtures her babies, giving them the love, attention and warmth that little kittens need. They also learn a lot from their mothers. Around the 6th week of life, the kittens and mom will start to play together. This will teach kittens how to hunt, fight, how to be a well-behaved social animal, how to jump, balance, and so on. When taking in an abandoned kitten, you will need to fulfill all of the above roles so that the kitten can still develop to be a happy and normal kitten. This is not terribly hard, but it does take time and patience on your part. It is a wonderful and fulfilling job to take care of abandoned kittens, but make sure you are aware of the commitment you're making.

The first thing to do when you bring the kittens home is to put them in a warm, clean and safe environment. Kittens should never come in contact with other animals at this point. They can catch chills very easily so it is imperative that you first stabilize the kittens and get them nice and toasty. Although your first instinct may be to feed the kittens, you must warm and stabilize them first. Kittens should be kept in an environment (you can use a large cardboard box as a makeshift nest) that is between 85-90 degrees, extremely clean, draft-free and at a high humidity. You will probably want to set a corner of the box over a heating pad or cover a corner of the box with towels. This way, there is a gradient of heat that the kittens can go to depending on whether they're feeling a little cold or warm. And don't be afraid to rub your hands over them (very gently) to warm them--your body heat is one of the best ways to warm kittens!

Once the kittens feel warm and are calm you will probably want to call your vet and make an appointment. The kittens should be checked for worms (bring a stool sample to the vet if you have one), fleas, mites, dehydration and other illnesses. Kittens have very weak immune systems, and even the slightest case of fleas or illness can kill them very quickly, so it is best to have them see a vet and get any medical attention that they need as soon as possible. Your vet can also give you an idea of how old the kittens are. See [Kitten Development Stages](#) to find out what your kittens should be doing at each stage during the first 12 weeks of life. Your vet should be able to give you loads of advice on caring for them, and he may even know of another mother cat that just had kittens that may be able to foster these kittens. Your vet should also give you a schedule for dewormings, and vaccinations (FVRCP and rabies) both of which are very important for the health and safety of your kittens. And if at any time point you notice the kittens not eating, acting lethargic or behaving oddly call your vet immediately as the kitten(s) may be ill.

If you can't find a foster mother and the kittens have been released to you with a clean bill of health, the next step will be to bring them back home, feed them, and take care of the little ones as they grow.

Bedding and Sleeping

For the first 6 weeks of life, kittens spend most of the time sleeping and eating, so the security of their nesting area is very important. The nesting box that you have already set up should suffice. After 6 weeks of age, kittens, although they still sleep quite a bit, will start to explore and play. So make sure the entire room they are in is clean, warm and draft-free. Again, you may want to keep a heating pad under their bedding for extra warmth, or even use your own body heat to warm the little ones (they will be very grateful for the bonding and attention!)

Love and Attention

Remember that these are babies and that they need lots of nurturing! Had they been with their mother, they would be getting a great amount of grooming, cuddling, touching and love. So as a surrogate mom, that role falls upon you! Don't be afraid to pet, snuggle with and hold the little ones and smother them with attention. Talk to them a lot as well, and they will get used to your voice. If you start calling them by their names, they will get used to their names as well. Kittens that are raised by you from such a young age will have a very special and deep bond with you.

Once the kittens get to be around 6 weeks of age you can also start actively playing with them (you can play with them at anytime but this is the time period during which they will be old enough to really get into play and learn from it). **Playing** is a very important part of growing up for a kitten, because it teaches them how to be social, how to fight, how to hunt, how to be balanced, and how to jump. It also expands their minds, motor skills and mental faculties. So allow them to bap things, chase balls, and anything else you can think of that they won't be too likely to swallow accidentally.

Cats who do not receive enough attention and playtime during this period are considered poorly **socialized**. These are the kittens and cats who are timid, skiddish, afraid of all humans and other animals alike, and those who are too aggressive, biters, or scratchers. The best way to raise a well-socialized cat is to work with that cat from the kitten stage so make sure to devote enough time and attention to the little ones.

Feeding

Feeding is probably the trickiest thing you will encounter when foster caring for kittens. First, make sure they have a proper formula. If the kittens are not weaned yet (generally 6 weeks old or less) you will need to feed them formula. You can find kitten nursing kits (containing bottles, nipples, a brush for cleaning, and directions!) and kitten formula at your local pet store. Don't simply feed the kittens regular milk. It doesn't have the nutrients that a kitten needs, and kittens solely fed on regular milk will starve due to lack of nutrients.

Before feeding, make sure to properly sterilize the bottle and nipple and warm the formula. If the nipple doesn't already have a hole in it, cut a small hole in the top, and make sure this hole isn't too large (you can always make it bigger later) or the formula will flow out too fast and the kittens will choke. Similar to what you would do for a baby, you can either warm the formula in the microwave for a few seconds or place the bottle in warm water. Either way, the formula should be body temperature (99 - 101 degrees).

Once the formula is ready, you can get the kitten in position for feeding. There are two positions you can take. One is to wrap the kitten in a towel and hold him or her like a baby. If the kittens are older, or if they aren't comfortable with being confined, you can use a second method. This is to let the kitten be on his or her stomach (the kitten may lie down or stand up- whichever he or she prefers) similar to how the kitten would feed from the mother. In this position, the kitten will 'knead' your leg, blanket or whatever is under his or her front paws. This is instinctual behavior for kittens--they do this as they nurse from the mother to pump more milk out of the nipple. In either case, make sure to hold the bottle at a 45-degree angle to minimize air and gas in the kitten's stomach. (if the kitten does get formula in his/her lungs and starts choking, simply hold the kitten upside down until the choking subsides).

Most kittens will instinctively take the nipple and start feeding; however, if the kitten doesn't seem to want to eat, here are a few things you can try (if you have tried all of these and the kitten still seems uninterested in eating he/she probably is ill and should be taken to the vet ASAP):

- Switch nipples (there are two types - long and short). Your kitten may just be fussy.
- Rub the kitten on the forehead or rub/stroke his/her back. Mother cats will groom kittens to get them to eat and this simulates the mother's grooming.
- Place a little Karo Syrup on the kittens' lips to stimulate their hunger.

So how much do you feed? A kitten should be eating about 8-9 cc's of formula for each ounce that they weigh per day. You may want to keep a journal each day of how much the kitten has eaten and the

kittens' weights. So a kitten who is 5 ounces should be eating 40-45 cc's per day. Kittens should weigh about 3-4 oz. at birth and should gain 3-5 oz. a week after that. You should weigh each kitten daily (you can use a kitchen scale). If the kittens are underweight, are losing weight, or are not gaining weight appropriately then you should contact your vet ASAP. When the kitten is full, you will notice that his mouth will 'bubble' with a little formula that he or she is too full to eat and his/her belly will be very full. After the kitten is done eating, just like a baby, you can burp him! To burp, simply hold the kitten against your shoulder and gently burp him or her. You can also hold the kitten so his or her back is against your chest and gently cuddle the kitten under your neck while rubbing the tummy.

So how often do you feed? (note that these are approximate times--let your kittens and their hunger be the ultimate determinant of how often to feed.)

- Under 1 week of age: every 3-4 hours
- 2 weeks old: every 4-6 hours
- 3 weeks old to weaning (around 5th or 6th week): every 6-8 hours

When will the kitten wean? Kittens usually wean around the 4th week of age. Usually the mother will start to wean the kittens when they start to bite her nipples (this is painful for her and thus instinctually she starts to show them how to eat regular food). If you notice the kitten biting at the nipple, it is safe to start weaning. You can start off by placing some formula in a spoon or on your finger and seeing if the kitten can lick it. If he or she can, then start putting formula in a bowl and getting the kitten to eat that way. You may need to have the kitten lick your finger and then lead the kitten with your finger to the bowl. Once the kitten is comfortable with bowl eating you can start mixing the formula with baby food or kitten food. The food at this point should be soft and slightly liquidy and easy for the kitten to lap up. As the kitten gets more and more comfortable with eating from a bowl, you can start mixing less and less formula in with the food until the kittens are eating regular food! Make sure that the kittens are getting enough nutrition and are still gaining weight. If the kittens are not getting enough food from the bowl, you may need to continue bottle feeding until the kitten gets the hang of it. Some kittens take weeks to wean, while others get the hang of it in a few days. What is important is that the kitten gets enough food, so be patient if you have a late bloomer.

One last thing to consider is dehydration. Kittens can get dehydrated very easily. The best way to tell is to do the pinch test. Grab a bit of the skin and pull it upwards. If the skin rebounds instantaneously then the kitten is fine, however, if the skin takes a second or two to fall back into its normal place he or she is probably dehydrated. Depending on how dehydrated your kitten is, he or she may need to receive subcutaneous fluids from your vet.

Using the Litterbox

Up to four weeks of age, the mother stimulates the kitten to go to the bathroom by licking and rubbing the kitten's genitals and rectum. Without a mother you will be left to that job (don't worry it isn't as bad as it sounds!). After feeding, rub the genitals and rectum with a cotton pad or Q-tip® that is moistened with warm water. Don't rub hard enough to irritate the area, just enough to give the kitten the idea of what comes next. Kittens up to 4 weeks should have a couple of firm, yellowish stools each day. After about 4 weeks of age, the kitten can start to learn the rules of the litterbox. After each feeding, place the kitten in the box. You can even take the kitten's paw and 'show' him or her how to scratch. Usually this is enough to give the kitten the idea on what to do. Remember to be gentle, because kittens that are scared in the litterbox will grow up going to the bathroom outside the litterbox!

Cleaning and Care

Kittens can get themselves pretty dirty during a feeding, and even if they don't, it's a good idea to groom them after each meal. This simulates what the mother would normally do, and helps them learn what grooming is all about! To do this, take a slightly dampened wash cloth and, using short small strokes, go over the kitten's entire body. You can also give him or her baths in the sink. You can use a washcloth, warm water, and baby shampoo. Make sure to never submerge the kittens or get their heads completely wet, because kittens can choke, get water in their ears or drown very easily so never leave a kitten alone in a bath even for a few seconds. As you can imagine, kittens need to stay very clean to stay healthy. Urine

can burn their skin, and caked feces can lead to infection, so make sure to clean them a few times a day. After you bathe them, make sure you thoroughly dry off the kitten. You can either do this with a towel or with a blow dryer. If you do use a dryer, take great care--never blow air into their faces, and make sure to not burn the kittens. Kittens can catch chills very easily also, and the last thing you want to do is to have kitty get a little cold! And always remember to wash your hands with antibacterial soap before and after handling each kitten. Cleanliness is a must around newborns, as even the slightest bit of bacteria can cause a kitten great grief.

While you are grooming and petting the kittens check for the following:

- [Ear mites](#) (consult your vet if you suspect mites)
- Ear dirt and debris (this can be cleaned with a cotton swab)
- [Fleas](#)
- [Ringworm](#)
- Mange

If you see anything out of the ordinary on any of the kittens take them to the vet asap.

Most people find that foster caring for abandoned kittens is one of the most rewarding experiences out there, so if you are caring for kittens, congratulations and good luck! Remember that feral cats, especially feral kittens that you bring up yourself, can make some of the most patient, loving and loyal housecats!