

# //////////////////// The Behavior Department

## The Way to Tame a Feral Kitten's Heart

A step-by-step approach to getting feral furballs ready for adoption

BY NANCY PETERSON



Food, interactive play, and patience are important tools when socializing kittens. But not every kitten is tamable, and prioritization is important. Those older than 5 months should be sterilized and returned to their colony, freeing cage space and staff time for kittens who are more easily adopted.

Chances are that feral cats are arriving at your shelter or rescue operation. Sure, you do your best to promote spay/neuter, indoor lifestyles, and identification for pet cats. And ideally, community trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs would be providing services for feral cats, so that your shelter wouldn't be tasked with trapping and caring for them when you're already busy caring for sick, injured, lost, abandoned, or relinquished pet cats.

But the reality is that feral cats may well become part of your shelter population. In part, it's a numbers game: Feral and stray cats produce approximately 80

percent of the kittens born each year and are a significant source of cat overpopulation. The kittens who don't receive human care have a mortality rate of 75 percent, and those who survive will be feral without early socialization.

It's more than likely that your organization will take in the occasional feisty little feline. But once you've got them, what are you going to do to tame them? How do you turn feral furballs into cats who'll be welcomed into someone's home?

### Baby Steps

Sometimes folks may bring in neighborhood cats and describe them as feral, but it's important to separate what people

tell you from your own observation of a cat's behavior. As with pet cats, whose behavior varies from extremely social to timid and fearful, feral cats often exhibit a spectrum of behaviors. And as soon as a cat is categorized as feral, he'll be handled that way even if he's not. Remember that no matter how "feral" a cat may act, you could be working with someone's pet who simply requires some chill-out time before further evaluation.

There is no magical age after which kittens can't be tamed. However, it's important to prioritize the socialization of animals who stand a good chance of being adopted, which usually means concentrating on young, more-responsive



To acclimate a kitten to your touch, place a food dish in front of him, wrapping your fingers around his chest and patting a little until the kitten shows no reaction or tenseness. But don't rush to pick him up or chase him; this could ruin the socialization.

kittens. "When you're taming kittens for adoption, you're kind of fighting against time," says Julie Falconer, manager of the Online Answer Tool for The Humane Society of the United States, an avid trapper and a board member of Voices for Animals, an animal rights organization based in Charlottesville, Va. "You want to get them tame while they're still at their most adoptable age."

When socializing kittens, your most important tools are food, interactive play, and patience. Kittens older than 5 months should be sterilized and returned to their colony so that cage space and staff efforts are expended on kittens who are more easily adopted.

Taming takes from two to six weeks, depending on a kitten's age and degree of wildness. Some come around within days, some take months, and a few never come around. Falconer has seen kittens' temperaments change overnight. "Sometimes the ones who seem most intractable end up being the tamest of the litter."

Keep in mind that a feral kitten in your care will be highly stressed—after all, her free-roaming life was just turned upside

down—and she may have never been near people, much less touched by them or confined. While he doesn't recommend leaving medical issues untreated, veterinarian Gordon Stull, director of the Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative in Shamong, N.J., acknowledges that treating kittens for common diseases such as ringworm and ear mites can hamper socialization.

### Your Own Private Orphanage

Ferals have special housing and care requirements, so having a room devoted strictly to feral cats is the best way to minimize everyone's stress and any health concerns. Whatever your setup, it's best not to house ferals near dogs, socialized cats, or in public areas.

Joan Phillips, executive director of the Animal Lovers League in Glen Cove, N.Y., has socialized feral kittens in her home and her shelter's administrative office for many years. Opposite the staff's desks are two tiers of wire dog crates and/or single-level condos with a shelf. A cardboard box with one end cut out is placed at the back of the cage with the open end facing the side of the cage. The box provides a prac-

tical and inexpensive hiding spot and allows the cat the option to retreat and not be near people. The cages are placed on tables so that staff can be on the same level as the cats and comfortably interact with them. In addition to the presence of staff going about their daily routines, talk radio and television sounds can help acclimate kittens to an indoor environment.

An orphaned kitten's dependence on people usually makes socialization easier. "They are hungry and catch on quickly," says Phillips, "even if they have to be wrapped in a towel at first to be bottle-fed."

Phillips thinks orphans are the easiest to socialize, but Falconer says orphans often lack skills for relating to other cats if they haven't been exposed to a tame cat who serves as a model.

"A lactating queen who accepts an orphan frees up staff's time and energy," says Stull, "but disease contagion is a real possibility." He suggests that only healthy kittens be given to an accepting queen, and both cats in the partnership should test negative for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) antibodies. "Milk-borne transmission of FeLV is a common mode of infection to kittens with weak immune systems," Stull adds.

Mixing litters can be problematic, he says, since the incubation period of most frequently encountered feline diseases is 10 to 14 days. Therefore, kittens from different litters should ideally be kept separate for at least that long to ensure that disease is not introduced.

### Keep it in the Family

Whenever possible, Phillips believes it's better for the queen and kittens to remain together. While being fed and cleaned by the queen, kittens learn to be cats before they're taught to be pets, she notes. At her shelter, a queen and her kittens receive a hiding box and are allowed a settling-in period with no handling for two to three days. To keep the family calm during cleanings, staff use a litter scoop or other long-handled tool to turn the box toward the back of the cage before slowly and quietly cleaning it.

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Before introducing a cat to the cage, insert a cardboard box parallel to the long side. The opening faces the opposite long wall at a 90-degree angle from the door. This helps all new cats be less traumatized by cage cleaning, and a cat who retreats to the sideways box is less likely to leap at the door to protect herself or try to escape.

Nancy Peterson is the feral cat program manager for The Humane Society of the United States. If feral kittens are socialized in your brick-and-mortar shelter or rescue, e-mail her at [npeterson@humanesociety.org](mailto:npeterson@humanesociety.org). For more information about feral cats, visit [humanesociety.org/feralcats](http://humanesociety.org/feralcats).

As long as the queen and kittens stay in their hiding box, staff put food in the cage the same way they manage the cleaning, using a litter scoop, dustpan, or other long-handled item. The kittens soon learn the humans' routine: cleaning, feeding, turning the box back to its original position, and latching the cage door.

As the days go by, Phillips and her feral-trained staff watch to see if the queen is responding to their quiet TLC by coming out of the box to eat. Often queens are already fully or partly socialized, but the stress of the environment and the kitten-protective hormones of motherhood may conceal that fact. "My personal opinion," Phillips says, "is that many very adoptable cats have been euthanized for lack of a

chance to settle or realize their kittens are not in danger."

Hissing and growling during the feeding process are acceptable to Phillips, but if she can't open the cage door without getting charged by the mom and her kittens, she closes it and backs away with the food. After five minutes, she returns and tries again. If they charge again, she moves away again. "You can actually withhold food overnight if they are being really tough," Phillips says, "but under no circumstances can you soften, or the kittens won't learn that food leaves when they charge."

If they don't chill by the next morning, though, Phillips may discontinue her socialization attempts. "It's a time-and-resource issue, as well as a possible safety issue," she says. She adds that with more experience reading feline body language, you may be able to attempt more complicated cases.

### Steps to Socialization

The younger the kittens, the quicker they'll come around to the joys of human companionship. And it's easiest to work

with one kitten at a time because groups of kittens may be held back by the attitude of the wildest one in the bunch.

"The little peeps may arrive at the shelter hissing and spitting, but usually the food method allows us to touch them within a few days," says Phillips.

The kittens start to venture out on their own as they get older and become more accustomed to the people who are constantly bringing food. "Once they become interested in the mashed cat food and KMR [Kitten Milk Replacer] slurpees, we place the food so they have to squeeze by us and allow us to lightly touch them with our hands or a soft brush," she explains. "When they accept this, we pick them up in the cage and put them right down by their dish, all the while facing them away from us."

Next, place a food dish in front of the kitten, wrapping just your fingers around his chest and patting a little as you put the dish down. Do this until the kitten shows no reaction or tenseness. Don't rush to pick up a kitten, and don't be in a hurry when you do: This is the most important step. "I've seen too many socialization projects ruined when a kitten is removed from the cage prematurely, panics, bites or scratches and flies around the room terrified," says Phillips. "Never chase the kitten. Leave food in an open cage and tip-toe out of the room. If the kitten isn't back in his cage within an hour, set a trap."

Once the kitten accepts gentle pats and your fingers around his chest, tighten your grip. Barely lift his front legs off the ground and immediately put his feet back down. Praise the kitten and let him finish his meal. With each feeding, you'll increase the height of the lift until his entire body is off the floor, each time replacing him quickly. When this is accepted, lift the kitten and place him at the door of the cage, facing away from you. If there is no tension or struggling, bring the kitten out the door and quickly put him back. Continue until you can lift the kitten out of his cage to food placed just beyond it. If he runs back into the cage, leave the door open and see if he ventures out. If he doesn't, repeat your earlier steps.

When you have successfully completed the above steps, try to briefly cuddle the kitten in your arms, gradually increasing the holding time. Holding should become easier every day. Once the kitten seeks human company, have other people provide food, treats, and petting to prepare the kitten for adoption.

### Beyond the Basics

“Rescues and shelters may be limited by the number of spaces and staff available for feral kittens who need socialization, so it’s important that the kittens become adoptable quickly,” says Falconer. If, after the three-day adjustment period, kittens in the 6-to-8-week age group still huddle with their mom and show no curiosity about food treats or people, remove the kittens for part of each day. If that doesn’t work, permanently separate the kittens from the queen.

“Kittens with bolder temperaments or who are simply very hungry may cautiously approach if you’re holding out enticing food,” says Falconer, “but they’ll typically have a stiff stance as they eat and keep a wary eye on you all the while.” These kittens aren’t approaching you for interaction, she says, but simply to get the food—an attitude you can hope to change.

Rather than move toward a frightened kitten, Phillips places a long-handled acrylic feather duster (the kind that looks like sheep’s wool) where the kitten must touch it when bending to eat. If she tolerates that, Phillips begins to stroke her gently with the duster. “We far prefer this to the artificial hand, as we see many kittens lean into the softness of the acrylic and appreciate it—especially if they have ear mites,” notes Phillips.

After a week and a half, you’ll have a good idea about whether the kittens are responding. “When they have [flattened] airplane ears [and] bite and swat despite your best efforts with food, brushing and toys, the prospects are dimmer,” says Phillips, “but using a soft brush sometimes changes their attitude immensely.” She has found that kittens who learn to love being brushed become very adoptable.

Because Phillips and her staff have had great success socializing kittens older



When feral kitten rehabilitation is done well, the result can be a happy (if feisty!) house cat.

than 6 to 8 weeks, they always try. She finds socializing feral cats fascinating, rewarding and life-saving. The availability of staff and volunteers determines how many kittens they can take on and how long they can work with them. “If the kittens have never shown aggression and you don’t force them to that point, you stand a very good chance of socializing them,” she says.

Once they’ve learned to swat and bite, she adds, you need to make a resource decision; most biters are dropped from her socialization program. A small proportion of kittens is genetically wilder and won’t tame even if caught young. Rather than stressing them with continued confinement, older kittens should be neutered and returned to their colony as soon as possible. Those kept too long may have problems reintegrating—and in addition, your resources may be better spent on more responsive kittens. You also may have so many adoptable kittens that excessively nervous feral kittens don’t stand a chance of adoption.

You haven’t failed if, despite all your efforts, a kitten doesn’t tame. “Some still belong to the clan of the tiger and savor their wild roots, as they have known no other,” Phillips says.

“It’s difficult to predict who will become truly adoptable in all situations,” says Falconer. “A kitten who has tamed in the shelter may act completely wild in a high-stress situation such as an adoption fair.”

Those kittens who do respond to socialization, though, can become beloved pets. It’s preferable to adopt these kittens in pairs or into a home with other sociable cats and no young children. Potential adopters need to know what to expect at home and should be informed that the kittens started life as ferals.

“A kitten who hasn’t completely turned around may be a good match for an adopter who has had shy cats and isn’t looking for a lap kitty,” says Falconer. Providing written instructions so adopters can continue socialization and bonding will help prevent the undoing of all your hard work. **AS**