

How to Raise Orphaned Kittens

Mom's gone, and you're taking care of her orphaned kittens. Here's what to do.

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Bottle feeding a kitten requires a special, patient technique. Begin by draping a towel over your lap. Hold the kitten in one hand so it's "standing" upright on its hind legs and plug in the bottle with your other hand. Once the kitten is going on the bottle, let it relax on its stomach in your lap or empty hand until done. If the kitten starts to slow down when only half of the formula is gone, try giving the bottle a gentle little half twist, which will disengage the kitten's tongue to let air into the bottle, but not make it spit out the nipple.

Out of the Danger Zone When the little darlings are about 3 weeks old, introduce a small litterbox made from a shoebox lid or other shallow, disposable container. If you can "tickle" them right over the box and leave a little bit of urine or feces in the litter, it will encourage them to get the idea. The burying instinct is, fortunately, a real instinct, so you don't have to teach them much here.

The kittens' demand for formula will increase as they and their stomachs grow and at about 3 weeks you should add some baby food to the kitten formula. Use the finest ground meats and stir in with the formula until it's completely mixed. You'll have to enlarge the nipple holes to accommodate the change.

Weaning kittens isn't difficult. Begin by spreading a mixture of their favorite baby food and a little formula in a pie tin and let them go at it. Afterward, you'll need to bathe them with a very warm, wet washcloth and put them on their heated blanket to dry. Soon they'll get the idea and you can begin to add a little mashed canned kitten food to the mix. Don't be too hasty with this step as too much new solid food may cause constipation.

This is also the "sensitive period for socialization," Dr. Richards said. "Socializing little ones is important, getting them used to both humans and other cats. The sensitive period is around 2 to 7 weeks of age where positive human contact, especially with different individuals, will make them friendly to everybody [later in life]."

Now that they're on their way to eating solid food and are socialized, you can finally relax, knowing that they'll make it just fine. Congratulations! You have saved a few little lives and ensured a litter of very human-friendly kittens.