

How to Tame Feral Kittens

Discover the secrets of socializing feral kittens.

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Posted: July 29, 2008 11:30 a.m. EDT

Q: There are an unusually large number of feral cats and kittens in my neighborhood this summer. My friends and I are working to implement a trap-neuter-return program, and I want to socialize and adopt out the kittens, but I have zero experience with handling feral cats. Help!

A: You're not alone. Most people first get involved with feral cats during kitten season, and it can be extremely intimidating when you are first learning how to handle a feral kitten. When I started working with feral cats, I brought a litter of four kittens into my home. It took time and patience to learn the tricks I now will share with you.

Keep the kittens in a small or medium crate or cage so that you will have easy access to them and they won't be able to hide in a hard-to-reach spot. Make sure they can't escape from the crate. This small space will calm them and allow them easily to find their food, water and litter. Allow them one hiding place for security, such as a box or carrier, and provide a soft bed. Talk gently to the kittens so they get used to the sound of your voice. You also can leave a radio or TV on when you're not there. I always hang toys from the top of their crates to keep the kittens stimulated and entertained.

Remember that feral kittens never have had human contact, and their instinct is to be fearful of humans. Kittens will sense if you are scared or nervous, so it is important that you remain calm when handling them. If you feel more comfortable, wear protective gloves. (It may be more difficult to work with them with gloves on.)

Give the kittens a day or two to adjust to their new environment and relax before you start to handle them. If a kitten is feisty, wrap him in a towel with only his head out and hold him for just a few minutes. (I call this a "burrito baby.") Do this about several times a day but only for a few minutes at a time — say 5 to 10 minutes. Pet kittens by reaching from behind the head and gently rubbing around the face, chin and behind the ears. It's important to remember that the kittens will be frightened at first, but be consistent and you soon will have a rewarding breakthrough.

After a few days, place the kittens' crate in one of your main rooms where they can see people and get used to you walking around, your talking, the TV, radio and just normal day-to-day life in a home.

Food is a great incentive for socialization. If a kitten is very timid, try to first give him soft food on a spoon through the cage. Then, move on and place canned cat food or chicken baby food on a dish. Every time the kitten takes a bite, gently pet him. He soon will associate you with food and begin to trust you. You also can reward kittens with soft food after holding them.

It helps to have someone with experience guide you, such as an Alley Cat Allies Feral Friend — a local individual or group with hands-on experience and feral cat expertise in your area.

You'll be amazed with this experience and what you and the kittens learn! Good luck, and please send me photos of your precious kittens!