

What Should I Do With Kittens I Found?

Becky Robinson, founder of Alley Cat Allies, discusses the stages of kittenhood and how to provide care.

By Becky Robinson

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Q: I found kittens outside. What do I do?

A: Spring is prime kitten season. When you come across kittens outdoors, you may be tempted to pick them up and bring them home with you, but that might not be in their best interest.

You'll have to think about the following:

1. How old are the kittens? If kittens are not handled in the first weeks of their lives, they are not socialized to humans, and are thus feral. The older they get, the less likely it is that they will become socialized to humans, and so it may be better for them to remain in their outdoor home. Although kittens begin weaning before 8 weeks of age, they should remain with their mother until then to learn proper behavior and socialization. You can try to determine their age using these basic guidelines: Under 1 week: Kittens' eyes are shut, ears are folded down and they are not walking. They are purring and making tiny noises. They are deaf and eyes are closed. 1-2 weeks: Kittens' eyes start to open — they are blue — and focus and ears begin to open. They are crawling, snuggling and kneading. 3 weeks: Kittens' eyes fully open and ears are open and standing up. They are responding to noises and movement and taking their first steps. 4-6 weeks: Kittens are probably running, playing, digging and pouncing. They are starting to wean, and eyes have changed from blue to their adult color. 8 weeks: Kittens look like little versions of full-grown cats. This is the best age at which to begin the socialization process.

2. Are the kittens alone? They could be abandoned, or the mother could be looking for food. Wait and observe from a distance for an hour or two. If the mother cat does not return, determine if the kittens are young enough to be socialized and fostered or adopted, or if they are old enough to be trapped, neutered and returned using the age guideline above. Remember, unweaned, orphaned kittens require round-the-clock care and bottle feeding until they are fully weaned. If the mother does come back, you have multiple options. The mother is best able to care for the kittens, and they should be with her until they are 8 weeks old. If the mother is friendly, you can humanely trap her, pick up the kittens, and bring the whole family indoors to a confined area until the kittens are old enough to be adopted. If the mother is feral, you can leave the family outside and provide shelter, food and water. Once the kittens are weaned, you can place them in foster care for adoption. If you feel the mother cat is not caring for the kittens properly or if they are in danger, you can take the kittens away from her and raise them yourself.

In all cases, be sure to spay the mother cat so there are not future litters of kittens, and the kittens themselves.

Before you decide to take in any kittens you find, learn all you can about how to care for and socialize them. At the Alley Cat Allies website, you will find guidelines and other useful information on kittens, including merchandise in our online shop that I highly recommend: "Feline Neonatal Care" (a DVD) and "The Guide to Handraising Kittens" by Susan Easterly.