

FERAL CAT CARETAKERS' COALITION
HOW TO DOMESTICATE AND CARE FOR FERAL OR RESCUED KITTENS

To domesticate means
“to adapt to life in intimate association with humans”

Feral and rescued kittens are the offspring of female feral cats or unaltered female domestic cats who have been abandoned, abused or lost, or are allowed to roam free.

Since most of them have not had an opportunity to bond with humans, they are often wary and mistrustful. Though small, they can bite and scratch when frightened or handled roughly. It is important to minimize any exposure to scratching or biting, as they may be little, but can be mighty.

Feral and rescued kittens come from varied backgrounds and will have distinct personalities. The circumstances under which they were born and the ability of the mother to protect and care for them can influence as to how easily they bond with humans. We may never know what rigors the mother went through to birth them and what they experienced in unsafe and hostile surroundings. Under the best conditions, even the rescue itself can be an extremely frightening experience. Felines do not adapt easily to any change. Persons caring for or adopting a rescue kitten or cat should educate themselves about their unique natures and needs. This is vital information for everyone to have.

Partially weaned kittens may be taken from the mother at approximately five to six weeks. Generally, this age is considered best for socialization. However, many kittens twelve to sixteen weeks and older have been successfully socialized. The process of domesticating kittens can take from two to eight weeks or longer, depending on their age and temperament. Any person attempting this process should be totally committed and endowed with an abundance of patience and compassion.

DOMESTICATING INSTRUCTIONS

When the kittens are first brought to their new home, containment in a cage or large pet carrier, placed in a quiet and safe area away from noise, children and other animals for one to two days is essential. This can be a bathroom, a small utility room, spare room or any place that is quiet and enclosed, warm and safe, but not totally dark. If the room has no windows, leave a night light on in the room during the night and a regular light on during the day.

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A frightened kitten may hiss and spit at humans as their response to being taken away from their mothers, a trip to the veterinarian for examination and then to a strange and unknown environment. The kitten who acts the most ferocious is usually the most scared, but can give you a scratch or bite and may try to escape if given a chance.

Place a small litter box and soft cuddly bedding into the cage or carrier. Visit them often or if they are in a room where you normally spend a lot of time, this is even better. Speak to them softly. Place a bowl of a quality milk replacement formula and moist kitten food into the cage or carrier and remain while they eat and drink to be sure they can drink the milk without assistance. Partially weaned kittens need to learn how to lap milk without choking. If they have never had milk from a dish, you may need to dip your finger in the milk and put some on their lips or side of mouth until they understand how to drink. Stay with them until they know what to do. Keep plenty of food available, as it will be reassuring and they will feel more safe and relaxed. You will need to visit them as often as possible, to check on the status of the cage or carrier and litter box. Always move slowly talking to them in a low and soothing manner. Leave a radio playing soft music in the room or having a television set on **very low volume** will also get them used to human voices. Keep the litter box clean and replace the bedding immediately if soiled. **ALWAYS WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE AND AFTER HANDLING KITTENS.**

It depends upon the personality of the kitten and your intuition, as to when you begin touching them. I usually begin within a few hours after they are comfortably settled, or at least the following day. Even though they may be frightened, it has been my experience that it is important they immediately feel the soft and loving warmth of the person that will be caring for them, as soon as possible.

Select the least aggressive or frightened kitten. Securely, but gently, grip by the nape of the neck, and with a towel or soft bedding in your lap, place the kitten. You can also wrap the kitten in the soft bunting (fleece material) when you pick them up. Move your hands slowly when handling them, as they may not have made the connection between the hands and the nurturing and bonding that takes place through them. Stroke the kitten's body while speaking in soft reassuring tones until you feel the kitten has relaxed. Pull some of the soft blanket or towel over the kitten and cuddle it next to your body. They like the feel of bare skin. Watch out for the nails on parts of your exposed chest. After you feel the kitten relax and less afraid, gently place the kitten back into the cage or carrier and go through the process with each kitten. Clipping their nails is essential.

A soft baby brush is also a good way to relax and bond with the kitten. A small dose of Advantage can be applied to the kitten when taken to the veterinarian to alleviate any flea problems. Brushing and combing for fleas is also an additional method to remove any fleas from the kitten. It is important, that the kitten is approached from behind while petting and introducing combs and brushes. Face to face contact is sometimes difficult for them at first. Little by little you will feel them respond and relax in your

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arms. From the very beginning, your presence, tenderness and touch is the most significant event in their lives.

During the period when you are taking them out of their safe place and placing them in your lap, also try to lure them out of the carrier or cage with toys such as cat dancer, feather toys, or balls. Use this time to play with them by introducing them to the toys you have provided. They may run back into their safe place, but it will help them considerably to bond with you. Playing is an excellent way to gain their trust. When they respond well to having access to the safe enclosed room that contains their carrier or cage, they can be let out for short periods of time.

Within 5-7 days the kittens should have made considerable progress. The kittens will be developing their distinct personalities. It is very enjoyable to interact with them as they play and learn. They should now have access to the room and can be placed in the cage only if necessary. If they seem uncomfortable in a larger space, it would be best to place them back into the cage or carrier at night for sleep. This will assure their safety during the night and also provide a cozy place to sleep together. Use your own judgement.

When you bring fresh food in the morning, they can be let out of the carrier or cage for the day, free to roam around and play. **Always leave the carrier or cage open once you have let them out so they will have a safe place to retreat, if necessary. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.** No matter where they are in the room, they need to have their bed and safe place available to them at all times. Never close off the opening of either carrier or cage and leave them alone.

If they are not already using the litter box, pick up each kitten and place them in the litter box, using their front paws to gently paw at the litter. Training to use the litter box is very important and simple. It doesn't take them long to learn to use their box. They may even choose to lie in it.

Kitten-proof the room before letting the kittens out. Seal up any nooks and crannies where a frightened kitten may enter and become trapped or inaccessible to you. Bathroom sinks often have spaces between cabinets just large enough for a kitten. Block access to behind bookcases and heavy furniture. Look for anyplace where a kitten can become wedged. Be careful not to leave **OPEN TOILETS** or anything that could be climbed and pulled down on top of the kitten. Protect knick-knacks, clothes and plants (some poisonous) from curious kittens. (See Instructions to Kitten-Proof Your Home)

If there is one kitten who seems slower to respond, additional attention will be required. Some kittens are very shy which may not have anything to do with them being feral or rescued. It can just be the personality of the kitten as with humans. The shy ones need more reassurance. If the kittens have names, use them frequently.

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A small room for containment is better than a large room or bedroom. Their world has to expand at a slow rate and large open rooms tend to scare them. In bedrooms, they can hide under the bed and could be difficult to get out without injury. COMMON SENSE WITH WELL THOUGHT OUT CHOICES WILL ENSURE THEIR SAFETY AND YOUR PEACE OF MIND. THINK LIKE A KITTEN.

FEEDING INSTRUCTIONS 5 WEEKS OR OLDER

KMR powder or any quality milk supplement is a must. Follow directions on the container and be sure to have it available at all times, fresh in the morning and evening with regular moist food. Boiled chicken breasts cut up and shredded, nutritious moist kitten food and a small bowl of kitten dry food. All of the food should be of high quality and the bowls kept clean and the food fresh. Each kitten can eat one can of wet food per day and sometimes more. This can be in addition to milk, chicken and dry food. Do not be concerned about their eating as much as they like. They are growing and need a lot of nourishment. I once asked my veterinarian how much to feed a kitten and he said “how much can you afford”? A bowl of fresh water changed daily should also be part of their diet. When introducing the milk supplement take your finger and dip it into the bowl and wipe on the lips or side of the mouth. One taste is usually enough. You need to make sure they can lap up the milk without choking on it or coughing. The bowls or dishes should be low and wide for easier access. The milk builds the immune system and is essential for those kittens not completely weaned. (I personally always include it whether they are weaned or not. It has helped in bonding with the kittens). BE SURE TO HANDLE EACH KITTEN BEFORE THEY EAT AND PLACE THEM AT THEIR DISHES WITH A GENTLE TOUCH. STAY THERE TO BE SURE EVERYONE IS EATING AND DRINKING MILK.

Check the stools for diarrhea, signs of constipation or worms and be sure they show no difficulty in urinating, such as straining. Special attention to the litter box is always necessary, as many kittens lie in the litter boxes for reassurance. They have not made the total connection that the litter box is only for litter and prefer to play and lie in the box as part of their safe place to be.

When the kittens have adjusted well and are playing and responding to you in a trustful manner, it is a good idea to encourage friends to visit and handle them as often as possible. Socialization with other persons will help them be more friendly. This is essential if they are being adopted to other homes.

Kittens and older cats will dart out the front door. The signs one sees posted all over the city are usually the result of someone not being diligent or ill informed about this. Be sure to inform everyone who enters your home to be on guard that there are kittens present. Cats and kittens darting out the door could prove fatal. When entering and leaving hold a

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folded newspaper, piece of cardboard, or towel in your hands as a barrier to prevent and discourage them from attempting to dash out the door.

Check carefully before you open the door and advise everyone of the same technique. This will discourage the cats and kittens for a period of time, but they will try again, when you least expect it. I cannot stress enough, the importance of this precaution.

FOR FOSTER PARENTS WHO WILL BE HELPING WITH ADOPTION

If you are a foster parent and plan to participate in the adoption process, here are some pointers. During the time foster parents are caring for the kittens, they can begin to inform their friends that the kittens are being prepared for adoption. If they plan to place them with adoption organizations, they must be contacted well in advance for their requirements. The organizations will also be able to furnish detailed information on kitten care for those ready for adoption.

When talking to prospective “parents” remember that most kittens will do best if there are no small children in the home. All of the work that has been done can be easily shattered by normal kid activity and noise. The recommended home is an indoor home only. Taking two kittens together is ideal. In most cases, a one cat household is not the best situation for the cat. They usually do better with a companion. Taking 2 kittens also allows for well adjusted and happy kittens as they can be friends and playmates for life. It is extremely difficult for kittens to be separated from their mothers and litter mates. We sometimes forget, they are families.

Kittens can now be spayed or neutered at 8-12 weeks. Females will come into heat around 5 months and surgery should be performed before this occurs. Mutually agreed to arrangements will be part of an adoption contract, prior to placing the kittens in their new homes. If you have no experience in placing kittens, contact the adoption organizations and kitten rescue groups in your area.

For additional information regarding kittens under 5 weeks of age, please see the web sites of www.feralcat.com/raising.html and www.hdw-inc.com/tinykitten.htm

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