

Taming Feral Kittens

Feral cats are homeless cats, many of which were born in the wild; others are pets who were abandoned or have become lost. They are for all intents and purposes wild animals. Those adult stray cats, which were once owned or feral cats of quiet temperament, may sometimes be tamed with patience. However, the feral kitten is often easily tamed if it is captured young enough. Considering the short miserable lives that feral cats suffer, those kittens, which can be tamed and adopted by humans are indeed lucky.

Feral moms usually give birth in quiet unseen spots where kittens will not be visible for several weeks. With no human contact they will be totally wild. When kittens begin to romp and play, they are first noticed by humans but are not easily captured. They may be captured in humane traps (available from the Feral Cat Coalition) and should be taken from the mother at 4 to 6 weeks of age. Older kittens can also be captured and tamed but the process gets slower and less successful the longer the kittens stay in the wild. They should not be taken from the mother before they are old enough to be weaned at about 4 weeks. Kittens taken too young are vulnerable to disease and may not survive. The mother cat should also be captured and spayed to prevent future litters.

The process of taming kittens can take from 2 to 6 weeks (longer for some exceptionally skittish kittens) depending on their age and state of wildness. Individuals can differ greatly in temperament even within the same litter. Some may tame up immediately and some may take quite a long time. Any person attempting to tame kittens should be totally committed and patient. The taming process is certainly worthwhile. You are saving lives and producing affectionate loving companions.

The steps involved in the taming process are:

1. Containment (I) in a cage or large pet carrier
2. Periodic and brief handling with a protective towel
3. Containment (II) in a small room
4. Exposure to other humans
5. Placement in suitable adoptive homes

CONTAINMENT I

A feral kitten may hiss and 'spit' at humans. They are usually terrified of humans. The kitten which acts the most ferocious is just the most scared, but it is capable of giving you a nasty scratch or bite and will probably try to escape if given the chance. Remember that to the kitten you may be a predator; the kitten may think it is fighting for its life.

ALL BITES ARE SERIOUS. IF BITTEN SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION AND QUARANTINE THE KITTEN.

Feral kittens should be checked out by a veterinarian and tested for diseases contagious to other cats before you bring them home. Keep them isolated from your pet cats, wash your hands, and wear a smock (or change clothes between handling visits) to protect against the spread of disease from the kittens to pets or from pets to kitten.

If a trap was used to capture the kitten, transfer the kitten to a cage or a pet carrier large enough for a small litter box and bedding. Place it in a small room away from family pets and children. Be careful not to allow the kitten to escape during the transfer process.

For the first two days, do not attempt handling. The kittens must learn to feel safe. Visit them frequently and talk to them quietly, but resist touching. Always move slowly.

Food and water and bedding should be placed in the cage or carrier. Many cages and carriers have food and water bowls attached to the doors so that you can feed and water the kittens without having to place your hand inside. If you do not have a cage, or your carrier is too small for a litter pan, place the kittens in a small room, like a bathroom, in the carrier. Place the litter box in the room and leave the carrier door open so that the kittens have access to the box.

Some people use worn clothing as the kittens' bedding to get them used to the smell of humans.

HANDLING

After 2 days, select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel over it, and pick it up in the towel. If the kitten stays calm, pet it gently on the head from behind. Never approach from the front. A hand coming at the kittens frightens them, which may cause them to hiss or bite.

If the kitten remains calm, grip it securely by the nape of the neck, put the towel on your lap and set it on the towel. Stroke the kitten's body while speaking in soft, reassuring tones, then release. Make this first physical contact brief. Go through this process with each kitten. After all have been handled; give them a special treat. Baby food or Hills "a/d" brand canned food off a spoon is always a great icebreaker. Repeat this process as frequently as possible.

Brushing with a soft pet brush imitates the action of the mother grooming the kittens and will help the kitten start to transfer its need for parental love to you. It is also extremely important for the health of the kittens to remove fleas as soon as possible. Kittens become anemic from flea infestation and can easily fall prey to illnesses in this condition. Combing with a flea comb also helps the bonding process.

Never stare at the kittens for prolonged periods. This is aggressive body language to cats. Avert your eyes frequently and lower your head often to display submissive behavior. This will be less threatening to the kittens.

Play with the kittens using "kitty tease" toys (a tiny piece of cloth tied to a string which is tied to a small stick) or lightweight cat toys. Don't leave the "kitty tease" alone with the kittens as kittens will often swallow string. This can be fatal.

CONTAINMENT II

Within a week the kittens should have made considerable progress. Each kitten will develop at a different rate. They should have access to the room and can be placed in the cage only if necessary.

If there is one that is not becoming tame, place it in a separate cage in another room, away from the others. This will allow you to work with the baby more frequently and will increase its dependence on a human. It will also prevent perpetuation of wildness in the littermates. All members of some litters must be isolated as not to reinforce wildness in the group.

A large room may overwhelm a timid kitten and cause increased fear. Bedrooms can be a problem. If kittens become frightened and go under the bed it can be difficult to get them to come out and stressful for them if you force them out.

Also try to kitten-proof the room as much as possible before letting the kittens out into the room. Seal up any nooks and crannies where frightened kittens may enter and become trapped or inaccessible to you. Bathroom sinks often have spaces between the kickboard and the cabinet just large enough for the kitten. Block access to behind bookcases and heavy furniture behind which the kitten can become wedged. Be careful of open toilets and anything, which could be climbed and pulled down on top of the kitten causing possible injury. Protect vulnerable knick-knacks, clothes, and plants (some poisonous) from curious kittens.

EXPOSURE

When the kittens no longer respond by biting and scratching, encourage friends to handle them as often as possible. It is very important that they socialize with other humans. Feral cats tend to bond with one human so they best adjust to a new home if they are socialized with other humans before being adopted out.

PLACEMENT

Kittens can be adopted out at 8 weeks or so if tamed and socialized to humans.

When screening prospective "parents" remember that the kitten will do best if there are no small children in the home. All the work you have done can be easily shattered by normal kid activity and noise. This is vital to remember when placing the kittens for adoption. The most suitable home is a calm environment so the kittens will feel secure. The ideal home is one which will keep their pet indoors and will take 2 kittens together (actually easier to care for and more fun to watch) or that will have an adult home during the day.

Be sure that you inform the adoptive family that the kitten must be neutered. You may want to ask for a refundable deposit from the adoptive family to encourage them to neuter. Or you may want to neuter it yourself and ask the new owner to reimburse you.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAKE SURE THIS CAT DOES NOT HAVE BABIES, OR YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF TRYING TO FIND A FAMILY FOR ITS KITTENS.