



Socialized Cat Guide



When conducting Trap-Neuter-Return, there is always the possibility that you will find stray cats who are socialized and friendly to humans, young feral kittens, or kittens who are not yet weaned from their mothers—orphans or “neonatal.” Cats who are socialized can be adopted into homes and kittens can be socialized, fostered, and also adopted.

This guide will explain how to socialize and care for feral kittens, how to raise neonatal kittens, and also how to find homes for any kitten or cat ready for adoption.

How to Find Homes for Stray Cats

- Try to Find the Cat's Home.
- Publicize and Promote the Cat for Adoption.
- Adopt the Cat into the Best Home Possible.

How and When to Care for and Socialize Feral Kittens

- How to Decide if You Should Remove the Kittens
- How to Care for Neonatal Kittens
- How to Socialize Feral Kittens

When caring for a feral cat colony and performing Trap-Neuter-Return, you are likely to encounter cats that are friendly even upon first meeting you. Stray cats act differently than feral cats—they tend to approach you more readily, vocalize more, and may look disheveled, as if they are not used to living on their own. A stray cat once had a home and is socialized to humans, but has become lost or abandoned. Follow these steps to either return her to her home or find her a new one.

1) Try to find the cat's home.

- Check for a tag or microchip. If a cat has a tag, call any numbers and attempt to track down the guardian. The collar may only have a number for a veterinarian; a call there may help track down her home. A veterinarian or rescue group can also use a scanner to help you determine if the cat is microchipped.



- Check local shelters and lost and found ads. Calling local shelters and animal pounds to let them know you are caring for a lost cat can yield results. Shelters and pounds are usually the first place guardians call when looking for their cat, and they keep lists to help match up callers. Make sure to ask if they have found pet or lost pet sections of their website or at the shelter in the form of binders

to search or post an entry. Be sure to check the shelter bulletin boards as well.

Be advised that if you take the cat to an animal shelter, she may be killed. Always ask the shelter about their adoption procedures, typical duration of stay, and “euthanasia” policies. If you do turn over the cat, realize that you may not be able to reclaim her if the guardian is not found.

Check your local paper’s “lost” ads, in print and online. You may also want to check various online resources, including your local Craig’s List, as well as national listings on www.petfinder.com/classifieds/classifiedhop.html, www.lostandfound.com, www.anypet.com, or www.pets911.com.

- Spread the word. You can place your own “found” ad in the same places listed above—your local newspaper and online. Additionally, create a colorful flyer to post around the place you found the cat. Describe the cat’s coloring, fur length, location where she was found, and a photo if possible. Include your phone number and/or email.

Be wary of dishonest callers. Ask callers to: describe their cat in depth; provide a reference, such as a veterinarian; send in advance or bring along a photo of the cat; and give you their name, address, and phone number. Leave out some information about the cat on your flyer to help you confirm the guardian’s story.

2) Publicize and promote the cat for adoption.

Once you feel certain that you cannot reconnect the cat with her home, it’s time to help find her a new one.



- Prepare the cat for adoption. To increase your chances of finding a home and the likelihood of success in the new home, we strongly encourage you to have the cat neutered and vaccinated before placement in the adoptive home.
- Create an attractive flyer and post them in as many places as possible. Flyers are inexpensive and often highly effective, especially when they include a good color photo and description of the cat. Include a striking color photo of the cat, looking relaxed and straight at the camera. The photo should focus on the cat’s face and body. Creatively describe the cat’s coloring, size, approximate age, positive personality traits, habits, and some of the things that make her special. Give the cat a name, and explain the name if it is applicable.

Keep the flyer short and only include relevant information about the cat—not what you have done for the cat, etc. It should also be positive in tone, even when describing restrictions or potential negatives, (including health problems, disabilities, age, or behavior quirks), which should also be included. Cut the bottom of the page into pull-off strips, so that people can rip off your name, phone number, and email address.

Put the flyer up anywhere you can; a great place is on community bulletin boards. Other places to consider: coffee shops, supermarkets, veterinarian offices, health clubs, pet supply stores, religious institutions, and libraries. Pass them out to your friends and family and ask them to post them in their neighborhoods or offices as well.

- Contact local rescue organizations and breed-specific rescue groups. If your stray cat seems to be a recognizable breed, such as a Siamese or Persian, research breed rescue groups online and ask for their help. They may be able to place the cat right away, as they often have waiting

lists. Although you do not want to bring the cat to a local shelter, these organizations may still be able to offer other assistance. Your local shelter or rescue groups can help by allowing you to participate in one of their adoption events, post on their online pet listings, or put up a flyer on their bulletin boards. Some have low-cost neuter clinics, as well. Find them online by searching by your zip code on www.petfinder.com or www.pets911.com. Or phone 1-888-PETS911.

Also, virtually every Petsmart and PETCO store in the country has local rescue groups that conduct cat and dog adoptions in their stores.

- Place an ad online or in your local paper. Write a creative, punchy ad and post it in your local paper in print and electronically.

Sample Classified Ad Text: *Orange tabby with great personality ready to steal your heart! Simba is a 3-year-old neutered male. Gets along well with other cats. Up to date on all shots. Call Susan at 301-555-1234. Adoption fee required.*

To discourage dishonest people, do not say “free to a good home.” Indicate that there is a fee to adopt. Post ads online on www.petfinder.com, www.craigslist.org, and in the other online sources listed above.

- Pass it on. You give the cat her best chance of being adopted by telling as many people as you can. Share adoption information in a company email listserv, in newsletters for your neighborhood or place of worship, at meetings of organizations or clubs, when you visit your veterinarian, and when you go to dinner with friends. Ask those people to do the same thing.
- Be creative and persistent. Creativity and persistence are usually rewarded. Think about the best kind of environment for the cat and explore all options. There are many animals needing homes at any one time, so finding a home can take some work. The key thing this cat has going for her is you. Stay positive. There are good homes out there.
- You are the cat’s best option for finding a new home. Some people think shelters or rescue groups would be best for placing the cat because they have experience, facilities, and screening guidelines. However, an individual, particularly one who knows the animal, can focus all of their efforts on that particular cat, provide the most information to prospective adopters, and screen for the appropriateness of a new home. Also, shelters or sanctuaries are often stressful for a cat. The shelter setting, no matter how nice, can bring on stress-related problems. Anxiety, aggression, and even illness are common, and these natural reactions may make adoption difficult or impossible. Lastly, remember that a shelter offers no guarantee on the cat’s life, and the cat could be killed.

3) Adopt the cat into the best home possible.

- Ask questions before you meet. Once you start hearing from people, be prepared to screen potential adopters over the phone. Ask them questions to understand why they are interested in the cat, what kind of prior experience they have had with companion animals, and what sort of environment the cat will be in.



- Ask potential adopters to fill out an application. Alley Cat Allies follows certain guidelines for potential adopters, and you will want to decide on the things that are important to you. When a potential adopter contacts you, you may want to give him or her adoption guidelines, so that they will

be aware of everything that being a cat owner entails. This will also be a way for you to screen adopters that may not be good candidates. Find a sample application online at www.alleycat.org. Some areas you should consider covering, both in the application, in the guidelines, and on the phone include:

- *Spay and Neuter* – If the cat is not already, ensure spay or neuter will be fulfilled post-adoption. You may want to consider getting the surgery done yourself before adoption.

- *Don't Declaw* – Removing a cat's claws is inhumane and painful. Make sure adopters agree to not declaw.

- *Home environment and other residents* – Confirm that the cat will be considered a member of the family who will share the house with everyone else, and not be confined or restricted to the outdoors.

Ask about children in the house. Young kittens are fragile and also playful, and so homes with children under six years of age may not be the best home for young kittens. Young children can severely injure a young kitten accidentally. Some cats are skittish around young children as well.

Ask the adopter if they have other cats or dogs, and if so, if they get along with other animals. Having animal companionship is sometimes important, especially for younger cats. Your cat may not like other animals; be certain of this so you can advertise this fact.

- *Housing* – Make certain that cats are allowed in rental or condo properties. Ask the adopter to provide documentation and their landlord's contact information so you can call and confirm that cats are permitted.

- *Medical care* – Talk to the adopter about potential veterinary care and make sure they have a veterinarian in mind. If they have had a companion animal before, ask for a veterinary reference. Ask the potential adopter what happened to their previous animals and if they have ever surrendered an animal to a shelter. These answers can tell you a lot about the person's understanding of how to be a good cat guardian.

- *Adoption fee* – Charging a fee for the cat's adoption can help you avoid dishonest people. A "free to good home" policy can attract people who will pass the cat on to research facilities or another horrible end.

- *Trial period* – You may feel more comfortable having a trial period so that the potential adopter can spend some real time getting to know the cat and you can visit to see how she is doing. During this time, either side can cancel the arrangement.

- *Post-adoption* – Ensure that the potential adopter will agree to follow-up calls or visits to the cat. Also consider requiring the adopter to return the cat to you (and not a shelter), in the event the cat must be given up.

- In order to ensure all these requirements are met, make sure you put together an adoption contract that you and the adopter will sign once you have approved them.
- Require a meet and greet. Once you are ready to move on to the next step with a potential adopter, set up a time to meet in person. Because cats are often uncomfortable when out of their normal surroundings, it is best to have the person come to you. If you live alone, make sure you have

another friend there for your safety. For further knowledge about the potential adopter and his/her home life, you may also want to consider requiring a visit to their home.

The most important thing during the meeting is to closely observe how the person interacts with the cat, and vice versa. Ask them as many questions as you can. Ultimately, your instincts should steer your decision-making process. Don't be afraid to recognize any doubts you are having and either address them with the person or cut the meeting short. But also be aware of the fact that not everyone will interact with the cat the way you would; that is normal—no adoptive home will replicate everything you do exactly. Remember, it is up to you to find the cat the best home possible.

- Finalize the adoption. When you have found a suitable home, sign a contract with the adopter and collect the adoption fee. Make copies for you and the adopter. Set up a time to transfer the cat, and make sure you provide the new guardian with any of the cat's medical records, as well as her toys and special food or treats. Be prepared to follow up and stay in touch.

And then let them bond. You will certainly miss the cat, but you should also be proud of a job well done. It took a lot of energy for you to find her a home, and you did it!

Finding adoptive homes takes time and creative effort, but it is not impossible. Thousands of grassroots groups and rescuers find homes for animals every day by following the steps above, being persistent and diligent, and remaining positive.



When you come across outdoor kittens, you may feel the need to immediately pick them up and bring them home with you, but that might not be the best thing for the kittens—or for you. Here are some guidelines on how to decide if kittens in a colony should be removed and socialized for adoption, and how to care for them should you choose to remove them

and raise or socialize them yourself. You can find more in-depth information by ordering kitten care products from our online marketplace at www.alleycat.org/marketplace. These guidelines are just that, and they should not be used as a substitute for veterinary care.

In addition to the information below, consider looking into Feral Friends in your area at www.alleycat.org/FeralFriends. These are local individuals, organizations, and veterinarians or clinics that may be able to help with hands-on advice, information about borrowing equipment, and veterinarians or clinics that can spay and neuter feral cats.

1. How to Decide if You Should Remove the Kittens

Deciding whether or not to remove kittens depends on a number of variables. Keep in mind that kittens not handled at an early age remain feral. The older they get the less likely it is that they will ever become socialized to humans, in which case it may be better for them to remain in their outdoor home. However, some kittens may need intervention if they are not doing well.

Remember that early weaning of kittens who seem to be doing well may lead to increased mortality or failure to thrive. Although kittens begin weaning prior to eight weeks of age, they should remain with their mother until then to learn proper behavior and socialization.

Ultimately, you have to use your own judgment depending on the kitten's circumstances and your time and resources. The best way to help all of the cats in the colony is to perform Trap-Neuter-Return and not spend all your time socializing kittens. Read our How to Conduct Trap-Neuter-Return guide at www.alleycat.org/TrapNeuterReturn. Follow these basic guidelines to help you decide.

Feral kittens can be socialized if caught at an early age. There is no hard and fast rule on how many weeks old is "too old" for a kitten to be handled, or how long the socialization process will take. Typically, the older the kitten is, the longer it will take to socialize her. Based on your circumstances, and the kitten's, in some cases it may be better for both of you if the kitten is returned to her colony after surgery. The following are guidelines that may help you estimate the kitten's age. Keep in mind these are just guidelines, not steadfast rules that will apply to every kitten.

- How to Determine Kitten Age
 - *Under one week:* (3-8 oz) Eyes are shut, ears are folded down, and kittens are unable to walk. They can purr and make tiny noises. The umbilical cord may still be visible.
 - *One-two weeks:* (8-11 oz) Eyes start to open (they are blue) and focus. Ears begin to open and movement is improved to crawling, snuggling, and kneading.
 - *Three weeks:* (7.5-14.5 oz) Eyes fully open and ears are open and standing up. Kittens will start to respond to noises and movement. The first wobbly steps are taken and baby teeth start to come in.
 - *Four-five weeks:* (8-16.75 oz) Running, playing, digging, and pouncing occur often. Kittens will start to wean and will be able to lap up formula, eat soft food, and use the litter box by themselves. Eyes have fully changed from blue to their adult color.
 - *Eight weeks:* (2 lbs) Kittens look like little versions of full grown cats. This is the best age at which to begin the socialization process.
- What to Do When You Find Kitten(s) Alone or Motherless

If you find very young kittens that are alone, you must determine if the mother has abandoned them or if she is just off looking for food. The only way to find this out is to wait. Observe from a distance or a hidden spot for a few hours to be sure she is not returning. If she does come back, you have multiple options to consider, outlined below. If she does not, you will need to determine if the kittens are young enough to be socialized, fostered or adopted, or if they are at the age to be trapped, neutered, and returned.
- If the mother does come back:
 - You can trap the mother, pick up the kittens, and bring the whole family indoors into a quiet, small room (like a bathroom), or large cage. This option is best for semi-feral or socialized mother cats, as confinement is not an option for feral cats.
 - If the mother is feral, you can leave the family outside where they are. The mother cat is definitely best able to care for the kittens. Provide a nice shelter, food, and water and make the environment as safe as possible for them. Once the kittens are weaned, you can place them in foster care for adoption and then trap, spay, and return the feral mother cat.
 - If you feel the mother cat is not caring for the kittens properly or they are in danger, you can take the kittens away from her and raise them yourself. Remember, it is best for kittens to be with their mother for the first eight weeks. If you choose to remove the kittens from their mothers, be sure to spay the mother cat so you don't encounter more of her kittens in the future.

2. How to Care for Neonatal Kittens

Here are some important tips to keep in mind if you do end up having to care for a neonatal kitten (one to three weeks old). Be aware that sometimes, no matter what you do, some neonatal kittens do not survive and can fade very fast. You can only try to be the best surrogate guardian possible, and hope for the best.



- **Ask for Help:** Contact local veterinary clinics and no-kill shelters to ask if they have a nursing mother cat or experienced volunteers available to bottle-feed the kittens. People have had a lot of success having mother cats “adopt” more kittens.
- **Heat and Bedding:** Kittens can easily become chilled and can actually die from chilling within a short timeframe. Be sure that from the moment you find them, the kittens are kept constantly warm. Continually keep an eye out for signs of chilling (i.e., kittens are listless and feel cool to the touch). If you have nothing else on hand, use your own body heat to warm up a cold kitten, and rub gently to aide circulation. It is important to note that kittens cannot control their own body temperature until they are at least three-weeks-old. Do not bottle feed until kittens have warmed up completely.

At home, provide kittens with a soft nest (like a box or kitty bed) with a heating pad or other warming device. Completely cover it with a blanket or towel, and make sure that kittens can move away from the heat if they want. Change the bedding daily or as needed when accidents occur.

Chilling can occur after a kitten becomes wet. Never submerge kittens in water. If you need to wash them, wash only certain parts or use a moist wash cloth. Be sure to always fully dry them with a hair dryer (on low) and towel.

- **Food:** Never feed kittens cow's milk—this causes diarrhea. Feed only kitten formula, such as KRM, which can be purchased at most pet supply stores. Use kitten bottles to feed, as they are designed specifically with a kitten in mind. If you have an option for nipples, the elongated nipples are easier to use. Follow the directions of the bottle manufacturer for bottle preparation. You may have to make your own holes in the nipple with a sterilized pin or razor; be sure you do this correctly so that the kitten replacement milk drips out slowly when the bottle is turned upside down. Sterilize the bottles before using. Wash your hands before and after each feeding.

If you find yourself with a kitten and no store is open, this emergency kitten formula can be made at home. It should only be used in emergencies, and should not replace kitten formula.

8 oz. can evaporated milk

1 beaten egg yolk

2 TB Karo syrup

Mix all ingredients well and strain. Warm before serving. Keep refrigerated.

From Feline Neonatal Care dvd from the Loudoun SPCA. Available through our market place at www.alleycat.org/marketplace.

- **Feeding:** Hold or place kittens on their stomachs and arch the bottle so less air gets in (do not feed kittens on their backs). Always warm the kitten replacement milk and test it on your wrist to be sure it is warm but not hot. Remember, do not feed chilled kittens.

Feeding should occur every two hours around the clock for kittens one week or younger. You can reduce feeding to every three to four hours at two weeks and from then on, most kittens can be fed about two to three times daily with a wet food/formula mixture. Follow the guidelines on the formula label for how much to feed. Kittens will usually stop nursing when full.

If you are having trouble getting a kitten to “latch” onto the bottle, try pulling on the nipple when they start to suck, this will encourage her to suck harder and latch on. You can also try moving the nipple back and forth in the kitten’s mouth.

If your kitten is too ill to suck on a bottle, you may have to use other methods such as tube feeding. Consult a veterinarian before attempting this yourself.

Weaning occurs around four to five weeks of age. Mix formula with wet food so kittens can begin to lap it up, or put the mixture in a bottle. Then mix with dry food and begin providing water.

- After feeding: As long as kittens are eating formula, you must burp them. Put them on your shoulder or on their stomachs and pat them gently until you feel them burp. Kitten formula is sticky, so be sure to clean kittens after feeding with a warm, damp washcloth.
- Elimination: Kittens under four weeks must be stimulated in order to go to the bathroom after each feeding. Usually a mother cat would lick her kittens, but you can use a warm, moist cotton ball to gently rub the kittens’ anal area to stimulate urination and defecation. Completely solid feces usually will not form while kittens are drinking formula. Start litter training at four weeks. Use a small litter box with non-clumping litter. Show kittens the litter box and put in a used cotton ball, and this should do the trick.
- Health Concerns:
 - Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)* – Though this is common in kittens, you should not ignore it. If heavy yellow discharge develops or the kitten has trouble breathing or eating, see a veterinarian immediately. A mild URI can be cleared up by simply wiping away discharge with a warm, wet cloth and keeping kittens in a warm, damp environment.

Fleas – Fleas on a very small kitten can cause anemia. First, pick fleas off with a flea comb. For a bad infestation, you can bathe the kitten in warm water to get rid of fleas, since using topical flea treatment can make small kittens ill. Remember, never submerge kittens fully in water. If giving a bath be careful of chilling – dry kittens thoroughly with a warm towel or hair dryer on low, then place on a heating pad. No shampoos or topical treatment should be used in kittens six weeks or younger.

Parasites/Diarrhea – Any drastic change in stool consistency can mean trouble. Parasites can often cause diarrhea, strange looking stool, and dehydration. If you notice any unusual signs, your kittens should be seen by a veterinarian.

3. How to Socialize Feral Kittens

Socialization techniques will help you prepare kittens to be placed for adoption. This can be a long, time-consuming process depending on the age and temperament of the kittens and should not be taken lightly.



- Initial Confinement: If you are dealing with a litter, separate each kitten if possible and if you can’t, make sure you spend quality time alone with each one. Keep kittens in a small room, like a bathroom, or preferably in a cage where you will have easy access to them and they won’t be able to hide in a hard-to-reach spot. Also keep them away from any other animals in the home. This small space will calm them and allow them to easily find their food, water, and litter. Allow them one hiding place for security, such as a box or carrier. Provide soft comfortable bedding. Consider leaving a radio or TV on when the kittens

a a small dog crate, keep them together, small litter box, food and water, tent it with some kind of sheet or throw, with the door side open... wrap them in baby receiving blankets if they hiss and hide, give them time to calm down...give them toys to play with will help...

are alone to get used to human voices. For young kittens, a ticking clock wrapped in a towel sounds like a mother cat's heartbeat and is very soothing. Litters can be put back together after a short adjustment period.

- **Touch:** Safety first. Aggressive feral kittens can hurt you badly if you are not careful. Wear gloves or protective clothing if you feel it is needed. Hold kittens as much as possible after giving them an initial two-day adjustment period. If a kitten is feisty, papoose in a towel with only the head out and hold her while doing things around the house. Pet kittens by reaching from behind the head and gently rubbing around the face, chin, and behind the ears. Hold kittens while talking softly and petting for about 20 minutes at a time, and repeat this often throughout the day. All young kittens should be picked up often to be petted, brushed, and played with so they are used to this behavior when they grow up.
- **Feeding:** Food is the best tool for socialization. You may keep dry kitten food out all day, but when you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it. They will soon associate you with food and begin to trust you. If they are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage. After holding kittens, reward them with some canned cat food or chicken flavored baby food on a spoon.
- **Play:** Encourage kittens to play with toys at around three to four weeks. It is important that you don't let kittens play with your hand or bite or scratch you. This is especially important when raising single neonatal kittens without siblings.
- **Introductions to the home and others:** After kittens are comfortable enough with you to fall asleep on your lap or purr in your presence, they can move from the initial confinement space to a larger, kitten-proof room. Introduce kittens to as many human friends as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.

When deciding what to do upon finding kittens, it is also important to think ahead for them. Can you provide them with a foster home? A permanent home? Will you have the time, resources, and energy to find these newly socialized kittens a home?

Depending on your initial decision, you will end up with either socialized, well-adjusted kittens who you can easily adopt out, or a colony with fully sterilized, vaccinated feral cats and kittens. Either decision is correct because, as you have read, taking on the task of raising kittens or socializing them is no easy feat. Be secure that you made the best choice for your circumstances and don't second guess yourself. Kittens can pull at our heart-strings, but in the end, doing what is best for you will ultimately be what is best for the kittens.