

Guide to Socializing Shy or Feral Kittens

Kittens under 8 weeks can usually be socialized very quickly following the guidelines detailed below. Kittens over 8 weeks of age who've had no positive interaction with humans often take longer to socialize. However, with consistent effort and extra sessions, these same guidelines can be effective to socialize kittens up to 6 months.

Location

The best places to socialize kittens are anywhere where the socializer can get on the same level and comfortably interact with the kittens without the kittens feeling towered over, "backed into a corner," or hiding out of reach. Most bathrooms work very well although they are isolated from continual household activity. A small room without hiding spots under couches and beds or behind furniture can also work very well. Radio and television sounds can contribute to getting outdoor ferals accustomed to the indoor environment. The double decker wire catteries on wheels can work very well to start socialization but at some point you must let the kittens out in a confined space where they can choose to approach you. Try to choose the set up which gives the kittens the most "quality" exposure to you and household activity even when you aren't actively working with them.

Small cages or carriers don't work well since the cats always feel cornered when we reach in and they have no room to make the important "mind shift" where THEY choose to approach US out of self-interest in order to get the food they desire. They need to have the option NOT to be near you in order to make that decision to approach. If you must use a carrier, cage or cattery to house the kittens, keep it in a busy part of the house and then bring it into the bathroom or small room and let them loose for the work sessions.

Cats socialize themselves by choice. We only provide the incentive... FOOD!

Food

Food is the most important tool to facilitate the socialization process. Growing kittens have an insatiable appetite which will give them the courage to approach you and be touched when they might normally never allow you anywhere near them. NEVER PUT DOWN THE FOOD AND LEAVE THE ROOM! It takes away any incentive for them to welcome you into their world. NO FREE RIDES!

The following guidelines below are not hard, fast rules. You may find that the kittens skip to advanced stages very quickly or you may find they follow a sequence of their own design.

Initial Evaluation

Once the kittens are healthy and are calm enough to eat with you in the room, you can safely begin delaying meals just enough to give you the advantage of hunger to speed up their progress in the socialization sessions. Kittens 6-8 weeks would hungrily eat 4 times per day. If you are only able to work with them twice per day, leave them just enough food in between sessions so they are very hungry when you get home and can work with them. If they aren't progressing, you are leaving too much food. Feed kittens 3 months old and older only twice per day, and don't leave any food behind when you leave the room.

First Sessions

Sit down on the floor with the kittens and put down the dish of food as far away from you as necessary that they will eat in your presence. Don't face off to them but sit in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile and don't even look at them. Progressively inch the dish as close to you as possible. With kittens 10 weeks and older, it may take a few sessions or even days before they are eating right near you. Stay with the kittens until they have finished eating each time and then take any remaining food away with you when you leave. Always leave water of course, but NO FOOD unless you are there with them. You can also gently roll small dry kibble to them across the floor. This works especially well with older kittens. The kittens may be frightened at first, so go easy until they figure it out. Progressively roll the kibble shorter distances until you are just putting them down on the ground right near you. The kittens may even start to eat them out of your open hand. This first technique doesn't work if the kittens are in a small cage, cattery or carrier. When you reach in at them, they have no room to make the important "mind shift" where THEY decide to approach US out of self-interest in order to get the food they desire. They need to have the option NOT to be near you in order to make that decision to approach. Cats are both prey and predator in the wild so their sense of fight or flight is constantly right there on the surface. If they have nowhere to flee when we reach at them, they can never relax enough to trust to approach us calmly and become confident and affectionate around humans. They need space to choose to change.

Eating Off Your finger

This technique helps overcome the fear of hands reaching at them by putting a good association (food) with that experience. When the kittens have progressed to eating from a dish right beside you with your hand touching the dish, start offering something tasty off your finger. Gerber or Beechnut baby food are favorites in Turkey, Chicken or Beef flavors. You may want to try this early on if they won't move closer to you to eat from the dish. Try both and see which one works first. Until they realize the Baby Food's consistency, they may want to gulp bites before they learn to lick it. Let them learn to lick from the lid of the jar, a spoon, popsicle stick or tongue depressor if they want to chew your finger instead of lick at first. They figure out to lick quickly, but in the meantime, ouch! The lesson here with hand feeding is to accept your hand reaching close to them, without them retreating in fear. Most kittens find Baby Food irresistible and will be soon climbing all over you to get a taste of it. Remember not to sit squared off and staring at them, especially older kittens. Once they are hand feeding and comfortable being near you, only then is the time to start looking at them more directly, talking to them and actively engaging them.

Lead Them Onto Your Lap

Once they are used to eating off your finger, use that to lead them up into contact with your body by their choice. You can also try putting a dish in your lap and let the entire litter climb up onto you to eat. The braver ones will start and the shy ones may need to be worked with individually at their level. Lead the braver ones as close as possible and see if they will make eye contact with you while licking from your finger. That's a biggie for them! Put the fast learners in a carrier to work with the shier ones if necessary. Put a dish inside and close the door on them, if they aren't quite ready to be handled safely easily.

Initiating Touching

Initiate contact at the beginning of a session where the kittens are particularly hungry and eagerly engrossed in eating. Put down a large dish of food near to you and try gently touching them and petting while they are engrossed in eating. Start in the head and shoulder area only. Stop briefly if they resist and resume working up to petting a bit longer each time. Try different ones and move around the group to get a sense of which need the most work. If they run off, lure them back with baby food on the finger and any bad moment should be soon forgotten. (This approach to handle mistakes works at any stage. Back up to a stage that they've mastered and work back up to where they "freaked-out." Don't stop the session until they've forgotten the bad experience and are happily doing one of the steps with which they feel comfortable.)

Preparation for Lifting

When they are comfortable with petting and touching around the head and shoulders, add petting the back and scratching at the base of tail. Next try moving to touching the underbelly. This area is usually sensitive and needs to be desensitized for being picked up. Try when they are busy eating.

Moving on the Ground

Try nudging them from one side to the other while they are engrossed in eating around a dish on the ground. Just having your hands near them and gently pushing them around is an important preparation to being picked up. Set up two dishes a foot apart and gently lift/scoot a kitten the short distance from one dish to the other, very close to the ground. If the kitten is engrossed in eating s/he won't mind being lifted briefly if it goes smoothly. If they run off, lure 'em back with a special treat, back up and start over. If they're hungry enough, it works.

Picking them up

Start sitting on the floor so the first real lift is still close to the floor from their point of view. Have a full jar of baby food opened and ready before you try the first pick-up. Try it when they are engrossed in eating right next to you rather than scrambling after them on the run. Lift them under their chest with a small dish of food RIGHT IN FRONT OF THEIR NOSE the whole time. Hold them as loosely as possible onto your knees and eventually try against your tummy and up to your chest. Young kittens are often reassured if they feel the warmth of your body and can feel your heartbeat when held against your chest. If it works you can try it up on your knees the next day and eventually standing up. Make sure they are very comfortable with the small lifts before you ever bend down to pick them up while towering above them fully standing. That'll be a day to celebrate!

Handling Without Any Food

After a good long session where the kittens are very full and getting sleepy, try gentle petting and work up to holding and petting without the incentive of food being present. If this works you should be able to try it at other times between meals. It may be hardest just before feeding when the kittens are very hungry and confused and stressed by being held when they have only food on their minds. There's usually at least one "love bug" in every litter that will give you hope for the others.

Transition to Adoption

Before putting them in a condo in an adoption center, test them with a few different socializers. Enlist friends to test how they do meeting strangers. Remind anyone meeting the kittens for the first time not to stare at them or face squared off to them like a predator would do. Have them come in slowly, sit on the floor and try the petting while they eat and try the hand feeding when hungry. Prospective adopters often love this interaction and it may be the “magic moment.” A crash course in socializing for the adopting family may be needed to assure that the transition to the home goes well. If the adopter starts them in the bathroom rather than turning the kittens loose to the run of the house, it will assure that they can bond with the kittens first and that the kittens will know where the litter box is. If not the kittens often run off under the couch to hide for the foreseeable future. Give adopters a copy of this print-out too, so they can understand what they kittens have accomplished and how they can continue and sustain the progress.

Interactive Play

“Most” feral kittens are frightened by interactive play when first exposed to humans. There is no rule for when to introduce it, or when they will accept it, but the best way to start is with a toy which isn’t too threatening. Leave toys for them to play with alone at first and then pick a favorite one and tie it with string to the end of a stick, wooden spoon or chopstick. Try to gently entice them from a distance, allowing them to get involved with your game without being face to face with you. Some people have found that interactive play was the breakthrough activity much more so than using food. Laser pointers are a favorite toy and a great tool for getting kittens back into the pen if you are doing the multi-location technique for added exposure to the household AND rolling them into an enclosed room for work sessions.

Be flexible to discover what breaks the ice best and branch out from that. Use whatever proves to be their favorite thing as a reward for new steps or to break through a plateau. Once a step has been mastered, only offer regular food as a reward for that step saving the favorite treat for breaking into new territory.

Remember the Mantra “Tough Love.”

Questions? Need help?

The APA! Cat Behavior team is here to help you. Email us at:
cat-behavior-team@austinpetsalive.org

Need to reach the Cat Foster team? You can always reach them at:
cat-foster-manager@austinpetsalive.org

Information courtesy of the Urban Cat League.