



**Spay/Neuter Clinic**  
12 Airport Blvd., San Mateo, CA 94401  
650/340-7025

## **CARING FOR AND TAMING FERAL KITTENS**

Feral kittens are the offspring of feral cats or of lost or abandoned domestic cats that have reverted to wild behavior. Kitten season can extend from February through November. Female cats can have three litters each year with a gestation period of approximately 65 days. Feral mother cats will teach their offspring to be wary and mistrustful of humans and to hide and defend themselves against adversaries. They will spit and hiss if approached by humans and though small, will bite and scratch if not handled with respect for their wild instincts.

### Catching Feral Kittens

Kittens will make themselves visible when they are about four to five weeks old, once they begin eating solid food. The best time to capture the kittens is between the ages of five to eight weeks when they are developed enough to leave their mother but still young enough to be tamed. They will be hard to catch. The use of a baited humane trap is recommended for safe handling of feral kittens for instructions, see section titled Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats available though the Peninsula Humane Society's website.)

### Orphaned or Young Kittens

If kittens are under five weeks of age and unable to eat solid food, bottle feed them with kitten formula (KMR or Similac) which can be purchased from many pet supply stores or clinics. (Cow's milk does not contain enough fat or protein for kittens and will cause diarrhea.) Place the kittens in a box lined with absorbent paper towels. Keep the box warm during the first two weeks of life, around 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Use a heating pad covered with a towel or an infrared lamp. If a kitten is too weak to drink from a bottle, feed from an eyedropper. Gently massage the belly to help digestion, and use a cotton ball dampened with warm water to stimulate bowel movement. (The mother usually cleans the babies during the first few weeks so you'll have to take on this task.) Start weaning from three to four weeks old. Mix canned kitten food with kitten formula and hand feed until the kittens are accustomed to eating on their own, then gradually change to canned food.

*Please note that kittens that are raised without their mothers are typically weak and extremely susceptible to upper respiratory infections (URI). You must seek treatment from a private veterinarian to treat URI as well as internal parasites that most feral kittens have. (Symptoms may include discharge from the eyes and/or nose, diarrhea, lethargy, and lack of appetite.)*

### The Taming Process

The process of taming feral kittens can take from two to six weeks depending on their age and degree of wildness. First and foremost, any person attempting this process should be totally committed and patient. Be cautious when working with ferals as they are wild and will defend themselves if they feel cornered or threatened. Never handle a new or strange feral kitten until you know how they will react to you, and always wear long sleeves with gloves when making first contact.

Below are the steps to follow when attempting to tame feral kittens:

1. Containment in cage
2. Periodic and brief handling with protective towel
3. Containment in small room
4. Exposure to other humans

### Containment in Cage

Begin with a cage or carrier in a small room and for the first two days do not attempt to handle the kittens. Place food, water and litter pan close to the front of the cage/carrier so as not to disturb the kittens. The goal is for them to learn that you're their food source and for them to learn to feel safe in the company of humans. Visit them frequently and talk to them but resist touching. Always move slowly. Leave a radio on at a low volume so they get used to unfamiliar sounds.

### Handling

After two days select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel over the kitten and pick him/her up. If the kitten stays calm, pet gently on the head from behind. Never approach from the front because hands will initially frighten feral kittens and they may try to bite. If the kitten remains calm, grip securely by the nape of the neck, put the towel on your lap and set the kitten on the towel. Stroke the kitten's body while speaking softly to him/her, then release your grip. Make this first physical contact brief. Go through this process with each kitten and give him/her a special treat after each successful handling. Repeat this process as frequently as possible. You may comb and brush the kittens gently as well.

*If the kittens are on medication, use liquid medicine in moist food or crush tablets into a meat variety of baby food. Forcing tablets down a feral cat or kitten causes severe trauma and can undo the taming process.*

### Containment in Small Room

Within a week the kittens should have made considerable progress although each kitten will develop at a different rate. They should have access to one small, uncluttered room and be placed in the cage/carrier only if necessary. Continue working with each kitten on an individual basis giving special attention to the most shy.

### Exposure to Tame Cats and Other Humans

If the feral kitten can be around another calm, friendly cat it will help the taming process. Kittens are copycats and will follow the tame cats' behavior, coming over to be petted if they hear the tame cat purr while being petted. Give treats frequently by hand and teach them to play with cat toys such as a cat dancer. Interaction with humans during play can hasten the taming process.

When the kittens no longer respond by biting, encourage friends to handle them as often as possible. Socialization with other humans is very important. Feral cats tend to bond with one human so they'll adjust to a new home better if they've socialized with other humans.

Reprinted with permission from Alley cat Allies  
1801 Belmont Rd. NW, Suite 201, Washington, D.C. 20009-5164 (202) 667-3630  
[www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)