

## Socializing Feral Kittens

Kittens who are not exposed to humans early in their lives learn from their mothers and quickly become feral. However, if they are caught and handled at a young enough age, feral kittens can be socialized and placed in loving homes.

Remember that spay/neuter is the single most important thing you can do to help feral cats. It is best to alter as many cats in a colony as possible before you begin socializing.

Kittens under four weeks old can usually be socialized in a matter of days, and kittens up to eight weeks old can take approximately two to four weeks to socialize. 10-12 weeks old kittens can also be tamed, but it may take longer. Taming feral kittens over 12 weeks old can be difficult and they may never be fully socialized to people.

### Getting Started

- Kittens cannot be socialized while they are still in their colony. They must be brought inside and confined so you have regular access to them. If you cannot do this, have the kittens altered and return them to their colony.
- Kittens can be taken from their feral mothers when they begin weaning—at approximately four weeks of age. To determine a kitten's age, see The SF/SPCA fact sheet "Basic Kitten Care."

### Housing the Kittens

- You will need to confine the kitten(s) at first, preferably in a dog crate, large pet carrier, cat condo, or cage. San Francisco residents may be able to borrow these from The SF/SPCA. If you do not have a cage or carrier, you can keep the kittens in a small room. Be sure to block up anything they could crawl into or under and remove anything that could injure them.
- Do not let feral kittens run loose in your house. They can hide in tiny spaces and are exceptionally difficult to find and coax out. In addition, a large room can be frightening and hinder the taming process.
- If possible, kittens should be separated from each other to facilitate taming. Left together, one kitten can become outgoing and playful while another remains shy and withdrawn. If you cannot separate them, the kittens can be housed together, but be sure to spend time alone with each one.
- The cage should contain a small litterbox, food and water dishes, and something to cuddle in like a towel or piece of your clothing.

### Socializing

- Food is the key to taming. Make dry kitten food available at all times and give the kitten a small amount of wet food at least twice a day. The kitten may hesitate to eat in your presence at first, but be patient. Eventually the kitten will associate your presence with food.
- Chicken-flavored baby food is a special treat that almost no kitten can resist.
- How soon you begin handling the kitten depends on the kitten's age and temperament. Older kittens and those who are more feral are harder to handle. With these kittens, start by offering baby food or wet food on a spoon through the cage. Once they are used to this, you can begin handling them.
- Younger and less feral kittens can be picked up right away. Wear gloves if you will feel more comfortable, as it is important to be confident and gentle when picking up any animal. Wrap the kitten in a towel allowing her head to stick out. Offer baby food or wet food on a spoon. If she

does not respond, dab a tiny bit on the end of her nose. Once she tastes it, she will soon want more.

- When petting a feral kitten, approach from behind his head. Gradually begin to pet the kitten's face, chin, and behind the ears while talking gently. Try to have several feeding/petting sessions (15-20 minutes) with each kitten as many times a day as you can.
- Progress will depend on the kitten's age and temperament. Each day you will notice improvement—falling asleep in your lap, coming towards you for food, meowing at you, purring, and playing are all great signs. Once the kitten no longer runs away from you but instead comes toward you seeking to be fed, held and pet, you can confine her to a small, kitten-proofed room rather than a cage. Siblings can also be reunited at this point.
- Expose the kittens to a variety of people. Everyone should use low voices at first, and approach the kittens in a non-threatening manner.

### **Important Tips**

- Handle feral kittens cautiously—nails and teeth are sharp.
- Do not give kittens cow's milk—it can make them sick.
- Once the kitten is willing to play, offer toys and use a string (not yarn) or a cat dancer for him to chase. Do not let the kitten bite, scratch or play with your hand.
- If the kittens are staying awake at night, try to play and socialize with them more during the day and cover their cage(s) at night with a towel or blanket.
- Leave a television or radio on (not too loud) during the day so the kittens get used to human voices.

### **SF/SPCA Resources**

- Fact sheets including "The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats," "Basic Kitten Care," "Humane Trapping," and more.
- Lifeline for Feral Cats (415) 554-3071. We can provide advice specific to your situation.
- The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats, no appointment necessary.
- Feral Cat Video Series, including *Socializing Feral Cats and Kittens*.