

## Socialization of Semi-Feral & Shy Kittens

The ideal time for socializing kittens is from two to seven weeks of age. As soon as their eyes and ears are opening, socialization opportunities begin. Socialization after this age range is still possible, but becomes more difficult. Attempting socialization after 12 to 14 weeks of age will have a more limited success. The goal is to help kittens learn that humans are a source of good things and to approach them for contact, including petting, companionship, warmth, food, etc.

- Larger litters do not socialize as well. It is suggested that the older the kittens, the smaller the group be that a foster parent takes; two *to four* kittens are a reasonable number. Kittens that otherwise should not have been shy, sometimes end up that way when foster parents take on too many and can't devote individual time to them. Unless the foster parent is experienced, has the time, and is able to separate kittens appropriately, groups of over eight are unmanageable for most people. If the kittens are six weeks or older, the groups should be smaller than this and litters should be split.
- Try to avoid raising solo kittens. We want them to socialize to humans, learn how to be cats, and gain a social identity. They are more likely to tolerate feline companions later, if raised with a littermate.
- Approach should be gradual, over days or longer as needed. The first few days may be spent just sitting several feet away and talking to kitty. Let kittens make the first moves towards you.
- Eye contact, when made, should be quickly broken. Staring at a kitten is threatening. When fearful or stimulated, a cat's eye will dilate. Be aware of the eyes, you may see them dilate as a first fearful reaction, but as the kitten gets familiar with you, the pupils will quickly return to a normal size. When the kitten is comfortable with some eye contact, use slow blinks (it is considered friendly).
- Keep the kitten in a room with no hiding places. A small room with a secure (for the kitten), accessible and visible space (crate, carrier) is best. No free roaming in a large space.
- Frequent visits to the room where you just sit gets kitty used to your presence. Try to lie down (less threatening to kitten) to let it get used to you.
- Desensitization and habituation can be used for taming semi-ferals. Desensitization reduces anxiety or fear responses by minimizing fearful stimuli enough that a pleasant (or at least neutral) state of mind is not disrupted. Pair positive activities, such as eating or play, with the fear-evoking stimulus. Example: progressively move closer to cat while it eats until able to touch the cat.
- If the cat becomes fearful, back off to an earlier level, like increasing the distance between you and the cat while it feeds. When feeding semi-ferals, it is a good idea to let the cat see the food being placed. Feeding is a positive experience as an animal must be in a calm or neutral state of mind to eat. Staying with the animal during feeding times helps desensitize kitty to your nearness.

- “Flooding” is when anxieties and fear-producing situations are continued until they no longer evoke the fear response. This is a stressful and risky approach and should be avoided. Examples:
  - ✓ Wrapping a fearful cat in a towel and holding it against its will.
  - ✓ Removing the siblings and isolating the most fearful kitten.
  - ✓ Backing a cat in a corner then grabbing it for pets or cuddling.
- Desensitization: Try to keep the cat in a calm state so calmness becomes associated with gradual exposure to potentially frightening stimuli (i.e. unfamiliar creatures, places, sounds, smells, sights, etc.). The presence of a littermate can contribute to a state of calmness.
- At feeding times, set the food a little closer to you each time, desensitizing the kitten to your nearness. As kitten becomes comfortable with this, leave your hand lying near the food bowl, progressing to having your hand touching the kitten. Take small steps towards the desired goal and let the animal make the moves as much as possible.
- “Speak” their language. Try responding with a "meow" if the kitten growls or hisses. At other times, talking to them in a long, drawn out voice with something like the resonance of a purr can help.
- “T-Touch” by Linda Tellington-Jones. Before beginning, the kitten must be approachable.
  - ✓ When you are able to touch the kitty, use a finger to make small 1-¼ clockwise circles all around kitty’s shoulders, head, and upper back. Make the circles small and quick and leave the body after each time. This kind of touch changes the brain and kitty’s reaction to touch.
  - ✓ Then progress with these "*T-Touches*" to the face, mouth, and gums. The gum area is connected to the limbic area of the brain (the limbic system is connected with emotional behavior and learning).
- Avoid sudden movements or loud noises; try leaving a radio on low to habituate the kitten to normal human noises.
- If a mellow, calm cat is available, this can be a great role model for the semi-feral one. Kittens learn a lot from watching and copying other cats. Therefore calm, purring cat that seeks human interaction, is good exposure for a semi-feral or shy cat.

\* Source: Seattle Animal Shelter 2009 Cat Foster Manual