

Using Food for Successful Kitten Socialization Tips



Kittens younger than 8 weeks can usually be socialized without much difficulty, while older kittens who have had no positive interaction with humans can take much longer. However, the guidelines below can help you successfully socialize kittens – and often shy adult cats as well!

Keep in mind that while these techniques are usually successful, there is always the chance that cats might not respond as well or as quickly as you hope, so you may need a contingency plan in place.

Before you start working with kittens, make sure you're on their level so you can comfortably interact without looming over them or backing them into corners. A large dog kennel might provide the right space if the socializer can sit inside; a bathroom or any small room without hiding spots can also work well.

Food: The Great Motivator

Food is the most important tool to facilitate the socialization process. Growing kittens have an insatiable appetite – and that fact works in your favor because it spurs them to approach and be touched. So don't put food down and walk away – make kittens interact with you to get that reward.

If the kittens are healthy, using the litter box, and will eat in front of you, you can safely begin delaying meals just enough to give you the advantage of hunger. If the kittens will eat in your presence, progressively pull the dish as close to you as possible. Stay with the kittens until they have finished eating and then take any remaining food away with you when you leave. (Always leave water, of course.)

When the kittens have progressed to eating right beside you with your hand touching the dish, start offering something tasty off your finger. Gerber or Beech-Nut baby foods are favorites in turkey, chicken or beef flavors (with no rice, vegetables, onion powder or garlic powder).

You can also let the kittens learn to lick from a spoon, popsicle stick, or tongue depressor if at first they want to chew your finger instead of lick it.

Body Contact

Initiate contact at the beginning of a session when the kittens are particularly hungry.

Start with them eating from a dish or off the finger and eventually progress to touching and petting while they are in your lap eating. Start petting in the head and shoulder area only. If the kittens run off, lure them back with baby food on the finger. You can also put a dish in your lap and let an entire litter climb on you to get it!

Expand petting and touching around the head and shoulders by touching the underbelly. Also try nudging them from one side to the other while they are engrossed in eating. Just having your hands near them and gently pushing them around is an important preparation to being picked up.

Picking Up

Set up two dishes 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 she won't mind being lifted if it goes smoothly and quickly. If not, lure her back and start over.



Sit on the same level as the kittens so the first real lift is close to the floor. Have a full jar of baby food opened and ready ahead of time. Lift under the chest with a small dish of food directly in front of the kitten's nose the entire time. Hold the kitten loosely on your knees and eventually up to your chest so your heartbeat can be heard.

Once that's mastered, try lifting while you're kneeling and then eventually while you're standing.

When the kitten is 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.

Most feral kittens are frightened by interactive play when first exposed to humans. Start with a toy that isn't too threatening and allows distance – a toy on the end of a stick, for example. Be flexible and experiment – and then use whatever proves to be the kitten's favorite thing as a reward for new steps or to break through a plateau.

Before putting them in a cage in an adoption center or at an adoption event, make sure they have been exposed to and responded well with a few different socializers.

Transition to Adoption

You may need to give adopters a crash course in socializing. You can also suggest that kittens be started in the bathroom or another small room with the litter box. And always let adopters know what toys the kittens are most comfortable with and enjoy most.

More Lifesaving Resources

These tips are based on an article by the Urban Cat League, which provides [in-depth instructions in socializing](#).

A [comprehensive workbook](#) with kitten care and socialization information, photos and videos can be found in our section on [teaching a TNR workshop in your area](#). The workbook is a joint project of Alley Cat Allies, the ASPCA, and the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals.

Alley Cat Allies has an online [illustrated kitten progression chart](#) that can help you work with kittens at different ages.

ASPCApro has many resources relevant to community cats, so please take a look around our [feral and community cat section](#) to learn more. Also, watch the [webinar recording Trap-Neuter-Return \(TNR\) and Colony Care in NYC](#).