

# How to Use Food to Socialize Kittens



Food is the most important tool used to facilitate the socialization process. 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. These guidelines can help you successfully socialize kittens with the help of food.

## **What You'll Need:**

Baby food (turkey, chicken, beef flavors)

Two food dishes

Toys

## **OPTIONAL:**

Spoon

Popsicle stick

Tongue depressor

## **STAFF TIME & RESOURCES:**

A patient staffer or volunteer who can work with a kitten over time to monitor and enhance progression. Make sure the kitten is comfortable with each step before moving on to the next.

## **Instructions**

### **SETTING UP**

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.

## CHOW TIME

Growing kittens have an insatiable appetite—and that fact works in your favor because it spurs them to approach and be touched. 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 closer. Stay with the kittens until they have finished eating and then take any remaining food 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. Turkey, chicken or beef baby foods are favorites (with no rice, vegetables, onion powder or garlic powder).

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



## **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!

Next, 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 THEM UP**

Set up two dishes and gently lift/scoot a kitten the short distance from one dish to the other, just slightly off 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.

Next, 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. Then work your way to lifting 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 can begin to try it at other times between meals.

## **TRANSITION TO HANDLING WITHOUT FOOD**

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 toy as a reward for new steps or a break-through to a new plateau.

## **READY TO GO HOME**

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

\*These instructions are based on an article by the Urban Cat League, which provides [in-depth instructions in socializing](http://www.urbancatleague.org/TamingFerals) (<http://www.urbancatleague.org/TamingFerals>).

## **We have lots more on this subject:**

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