



Kitten Fostering

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Is This an Orphan Kitten?

Keeping the family together during kitten season

After reading this article, if you believe that you've found an orphaned kitten, please read "Raising Orphan Kittens" (below) for care instructions.

March to November is kitten season, the time of the year when most kittens are born and shelters are busiest with incoming cats and kittens. Reports of people finding orphaned kittens increase during this time. If you've found an orphan kitten, preserving its health is a difficult job requiring prompt action. However, right up front, take a moment to decide if the kitten or litter you've located has truly been orphaned. Sometimes well-meaning people unknowingly separate kittens from their mother, making things worse instead of better. This article will help you determine if you're dealing with an orphan situation.

WHERE'S MOM?

The mother cat usually remains continuously with newborn kittens for one or two days after giving birth. She may then leave the 'nest' for short periods. Even well cared-for domestic mother cats with litters indoors may leave the nest for several hours at a time about two weeks after giving birth. Feral mothers, needing to hunt for food, will leave the nest for intervals at a much earlier stage. Also, a mother cat will often pick up and move her litter to a new location, especially during the first few weeks after birth. Establishing a new nest is part of the cat's instinctual behavior to safeguard her young by not remaining in one place too long.

WHAT TO DO?

When you find small kittens without a mother cat present, the mother may simply be away hunting for food or may be moving the kittens, one-by-one, to or from the place you found them. In other words, don't immediately assume the kittens are orphans. If the kittens are safe for the time being, you should observe the nest to see that the mother returns soon and observe quietly from a safe distance if dealing with a shy or feral mother. The goal here is to do what is best for the mother and her litter -- and it is best to keep a mother together with her kittens if possible, not for emotional reasons, but for the best chance of survival. Not only is hand-raising a young, "pre-wean" kitten an intensive round-the-clock job, but also the mortality rate for these young kittens separated from their mothers is much higher than if they had been kept together.

Remember that if you encounter a lone kitten, mom may be moving the kittens, and the lone kitten could be either the first to be moved to the new location, or the last to be moved from the old.

The same considerations apply to a lone mother cat. For instance, when trapping feral cats, if you trap a nursing mother you must try to find her kittens. In fact if you are trying to trap a feral litter and their mother, you can rely on the mother returning to the nest in order to trap her with her kittens, allowing you to keep the mother and kittens safely together.

In a home situation, kittens should not be taken from the mother until they are 8 to 10 weeks of age. However, kittens born to feral mothers should be taken away, if possible, at about 4 weeks old. At this age, it is easy to tame them and they have gotten 4 weeks' worth of the precious antibodies mother's milk provides. As they get older, it gets increasingly harder to tame them; kittens over the age of 8 weeks who have had no human contact will probably take months to tame...if it can be done at all.

When observing kittens you've found, there is no set length of time that you should wait to watch for a returning mother cat, but think in terms of only a few hours. If the kittens are clean, plump, and sleeping quietly in a heap, chances are that they've got an attentive mom and should be left alone. Abandoned kittens will often be dirty and the nest will be soiled, and they will cry continuously because they're hungry. It's a tough call, especially if you don't know how long the kittens have been alone when you discover them. If you wait too long, the kittens can weaken beyond recovery (chilling and dehydration are major concerns).

By all means, if you've found an orphaned litter we want you to be able to help these kittens reach a happy, healthy adulthood. But before acting, consider the information above and take a moment to ask yourself: "Are these kittens orphans?"

Raising Orphan Kittens

A kitten may need hand raising because the mother has died, become ill, rejected the kittens or abandoned them. In the case of feral (wild) cats, the kittens may have been separated from the mother for taming.

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If you have an un-weaned (too young to eat solid food) kitten that must be bottle fed, you must be prepared to devote considerable energy and constant care if the kitten is to have a good chance at survival. The younger the kitten, the more fragile it is. Very young kittens under two weeks of age may not survive without a mother no matter how good the care, *but don't give up!*

WARMTH AND FIRST AID

As soon as you find an orphaned kitten, it must be protected from becoming chilled. Immediately place it under your clothes next to your skin. Most of the young kitten's energy is needed for growth and crying for more food, so there's not a lot left over for heat generation. Normally the mother cat and littermates would provide a good deal of warmth. During their first week, kittens should be kept between 88° and 92° degrees. For the next two weeks they still need temperatures of 80° degrees or so. When they reach five weeks or so they can tolerate a lower room temperature. If possible, take the kitten to a veterinarian to be checked for dehydration and general condition. If the kitten's skin on the back of their neck stands up when gently pinched, your kitten is dehydrated. Kittens can become dehydrated very quickly without their mother and may need subcutaneous fluids injected under the skin to hydrate them. Kittens that have become dehydrated will have very little energy or appetite, so this is important to take care of *immediately*. Stools should be checked for worms and parasites. Most veterinarian offices can provide advice on hand-raising kittens as well as help with necessary supplies, so please don't skip this step. When you get the kitten home you must continue to provide warmth. Find a place in your home that is warm, draft-free and isolated from other pets and provide them with a soft blanket and a snuggle safe heating disk or a heating pad turned on low under the blanket so they don't become chilled. *Never feed a chilled kitten!* Always warm them up before feeding.

FEEDING

Do NOT use cow's milk to feed your kitten! Kittens must have a kitten formula like KMR (Kitten Milk

Replacer), which can be purchased from a pet supply store. Feeding can be done with a nursing bottle or an eyedropper. **Be careful not to force feed the kitten.** Let the kitten suck the fluid at its own pace, otherwise you can accidentally fill the kitten's lungs with formula and cause aspiration pneumonia. If the kitten is old enough to suckle, the bottle method is best. *Make sure to never squeeze the bottle!* Also, make sure to clean and sterilize all utensils before each feeding. To feed your kitten, place it stomach down on a towel or other textured surface to which it can cling. Open its mouth gently with the tip of your finger, and then slip the nipple between its jaws. To prevent air from entering the kitten's stomach, hold the bottle at a 45-degree angle, keeping a light pull on the bottle to encourage vigorous sucking. If a suckling kitten gets formula into its lungs, *immediately* hold the kitten upside down until the choking stops and the airway is cleared. If the kitten is not strong enough to suckle, seek veterinary assistance immediately.

Formula should be warmed to body temperature and fed to very young kittens every 3-4 hours. As they get older every 6-8 hours should be enough. A kitten needs approximately 8 cc's of formula per ounce of body weight per day. The kitten's age determines the number of daily feedings it should receive. When a kitten has had enough formula, it will stop suckling and its tummy will be rounded. After each meal, burp the kitten by holding it upright against your shoulder and patting its back lightly. **Do not overfeed kittens!** Overfeeding can bring on diarrhea as well as cause other health problems.

FEEDING GUIDE

Age in Weeks	Avg. Weight of Kittens	Amount of Formula per Day	Number of Feedings per Day
1	4 ounces	32 cc	6
2	7 ounces	56 cc	5
3	10 ounces	80 cc	4
4	13 ounces	104 cc	4
5	1 pound	128 cc	3

For kittens with a lack of appetite or anemia (very pale gums and foot pads), Nutri-Cal, a vitamin/mineral supplement available at pet food stores, will stimulate appetite and rebuild systems. Follow the directions on the tube for dosage.

Kittens should be weighed frequently to ensure that they are growing properly. You'll soon know if your orphans are thriving because they will grow at an incredible rate—usually four ounces per week.

STIMULATION

The kitten's natural mother takes care of both ends of her baby. By licking the kitten's lower abdomen, she stimulates the bowels and bladder and tidies up the resulting mess. A surrogate cat mom (you!) should gently rub the kitten's bottom with a cotton ball or pad or tissues moistened with warm water. This stimulates the discharge of waste and keeps the kitten clean. Be careful to rub only enough to get them to expel waste materials. Keep the area clean and watch for chafing which might indicate that you are rubbing too hard or not cleaning well enough.

When you feed and clean the kittens, wash their fur all over with a barely damp cloth and use short stokes as their mother would when licking them. This cleans their fur, teaches them to clean themselves, and gives them a feeling of attention and well being.

If the kitten has diarrhea and becomes caked with stool, it is easier on their skin to wash their bottoms with warm water by holding their bottom under a gently running faucet rather than using a wet cloth. The kitten's instinctive need to suckle (frustrated by the lack of the mother's breast) may cause the kitten to suckle its litter-mate's ears, tail or genitals, causing irritations to develop. Try to satisfy this need by

caressing each kitten's mouth with your finger or a soft cloth and providing them with a soft blanket to suckle on.

FLEAS

Abandoned kittens will need to be cleaned and rid of fleas soon after they are found. Flea anemia can hamper any attempt to save the kitten and fleas carry tapeworm eggs. Using a flea comb is safest, although one tiny drop of *Advantage* on the back of the neck has been found to be safe and effective and quick to kill fleas while not harming even day old kittens. Do not use other flea products as they could kill your kitten!

WEANING (transitioning to solid food)

If necessary, you may begin weaning the kitten at 4 to 5 weeks of age. Start by feeding it warmed formula in a bowl, then gradually introduce solid food. Gerber Chicken Meat baby food or canned Kitten food, mixed with warm water or warm KMR, works well. Or you can moisten dry Royal Canin Baby Cat kitten food with formula or water. Don't expect the kitten to be weaned overnight—it can take a while. As the kitten eats more often from the bowl, you can begin to reduce the bottle feedings, but don't stop the bottle until you're sure your kitten is eating enough solid food on his own.

Try to buy high quality food for the kittens (from the vet or pet food stores). Much of what is sold in supermarkets is pure junk food and may not help your kitten thrive. Changes in diet or certain foods can cause diarrhea, so please keep an eye on stools. Diarrhea can be life-threatening to a young kitten.

LITTER BOX TRAINING

The four-week mark is a good time to introduce the kitten to the litter box. Place the kitten in the box after each meal. You can also hold them over the box while you stimulate them to give them the idea and place the soiled tissue in the corner of the box so the scent will draw them back to the box. You may have to take the kitten's paw and show it how to scratch in the litter. Usually the kitten will catch on quickly.

LOVE AND ATTENTION

Besides food, warmth and stimulation, the kitten needs emotional closeness. Pet it frequently and let it snuggle against your warm skin as often as possible. Some experts believe that hand-raised kittens show higher intelligence, greater loyalty and deeper affection for their owners.

MILESTONES

At birth, a kitten should weigh 2-4 ounces. By the end of its first week it should double in body weight. The kitten should open its eyes at about eight days. The eyes will stay blue for about four more weeks. (The true eye color will not appear until the kitten is about three-months-old.)

At two weeks the ears will start to stand up. At about three weeks the kitten will try to walk. At four weeks kittens start to play with each other and develop teeth. The kitten should be ready for adoption at eight weeks, and can be spayed or neutered at that time if in good health as well as receive its first FVRCP vaccination.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Orphaned kittens are especially vulnerable to diseases. At the first sign of any abnormal behavior or loss of appetite, please take them to the veterinarian. Things to watch for:

- Upper respiratory infections, like human colds, are caused by various viruses and claim many kittens each year. Some of these same viruses, or an organism known as Chlamydia, can also cause permanent damage to a kitten's eyes. If bacteria invade the infected eye, the organisms can puncture the tough covering, resulting in blindness. Even a lesser infection can leave the eye badly scarred.
- Diarrhea can result from disease, food changes, parasites, or overfeeding. The resulting dehydration can be deadly.
- Distemper is also a chronic danger to young cats, especially those who did not have the advantage of the mother cat's antibodies. It is airborne, very contagious, and often a killer.

A FINAL WORD

Caring for an orphaned kitten can be difficult and even the most conscientious foster parent may lose a little one. If a kitten dies, the foster parent should not blame himself or herself. A kitten is most likely to die at birth, in its first week, or during the weaning process. But, armed with common sense and an ability to care (as well as accurate information), you have a good chance of raising a motherless kitten to the adoption age and giving him or her a chance to have a good life! ***Please be sure to spay or neuter your kitten!***

Stages of Kitten Development

Week 1 (1-7 days)

Kittens are born blind and deaf. Their eyes are closed and their ears folded down. They are pinkish and smaller than your hand.

- The umbilical cord remains attached for the first three days.
- Weight: At birth they usually weigh between 2 and 4 ounces.
- They will need to be bottle fed and helped with elimination.
- Newborn kittens are unable to regulate their body temperature. Keep their environment at a constant of 80-90 degrees.



Week 2 (8-14 days)

- Eyes begin to open though vision is poor at this stage. Do not force eyes open as it could result in damage. Eyes are still blue. Watch for any signs of infection such as crustiness or secretion.
- Weight: Kittens should gain approximately ½ an ounce a day, and by day 14, the kitten should have doubled its birth weight.



Week 3 (15-21 days)

- At 15 days old kittens can be bottle fed every 4-6 hours and will still need help with elimination.
- They will begin to shakily move about and may try to walk and explore.
- Ears will be erect. Eyes are wide open.
- Baby teeth begin to come in and they can now purr!



Week 4 (22-28 days)

- Kittens are becoming more active and mobile.
- Their eyesight is improving, though not fully developed.
- Their sense of hearing is now well developed.
- You may start to provide a small plate of water or warmed KMR.



Week 5 (29-35 days)

- At 28 days old kittens should weigh 1lb and you may start introducing kitten canned and dry food. Mixing the new food with kitten formula will make the transition easier.
- Kittens this age can start to learn to use a litter box.
- Kittens are more coordinated and physically active.



Weeks 6 to 8 (36-60 days)

- Kittens should be eating four small meals a day and by eight weeks should be eating mostly solid food.
- They should have almost all of their baby teeth by now.
- Healthy kittens this age should be extremely active.
- Kittens receive their first vaccinations at 6-8 weeks of age.
- At two months they should weigh 2 lbs and can be spayed or neutered.



IMPORTANT!

This is a guide only, as all kittens develop at their own pace, but it does provide you with a rough idea as to what should be happening when. It is important to keep records of weight; kittens should gain weight steadily—about 4 ounces a week. If they are not gaining weight, please contact a veterinarian immediately. Also be on the lookout for signs of illness in your kitten. These could include: loss of appetite, sleeping alone (at a very young age), rejection from the mother, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, sneezing, discharge from the eyes or nose, etc. If you are at all worried, please seek veterinary advice.

Pre-Wean Kitten Shopping List

For Kittens under 4 weeks (less than 1 lb)

KMR (Kitten Milk Replacer)
Four Paws or PetAg nursing bottles
BeneBac
Microwaveable heating disk
Flea comb
Small pet carrier
Small cat bed (or soft blanket)

For Kittens 4-8 weeks (1-2 lbs)

KMR (up to 6 weeks)
Four Paws or PetAg nursing bottles (up to 6 weeks)
BeneBac
Nature's Variety Instinct Chicken, Wellness, or Chicken Soup
Canned kitten food

Halo Sensitive Formula Turkey or Royal Canin BabyCat kibble
Shallow food and water bowls
Smart Litter Organic and Safe (or other kitten-safe litter)
Small litter pan
Litter scoop
Flea comb
Small pet carrier
Small cat bed (or soft blanket)