

Kitty in Their Hands

Bringing out the best behaviors in kittens

BY NANCY PETERSON



Fosterers have a big job when taking in kittens from a shelter or rescue group: They have to turn rambunctious little fur balls into emotionally and physically resilient young cats who will make fine companions. Nancy Peterson's foster kitten Jimmy (above) and his sister Twinky were adopted together in February, and went home with a young woman in Frederick, Md.

Theresa Foley's introduction to fostering started 15 years ago when she trapped feral cats and kittens on her street in old town Key West, Fla. Foley fostered several six-toed kittens—perhaps relatives of the felines who still roam Ernest Hemingway's property on the island—during the three years it took to trap one elusive mom cat. "I began fostering mostly out of necessity, because there were not that many people willing to do it or set up to do it," she says.

At the time, information about feline development and behavior was sparse, and Foley was lucky to find an experienced fosterer to mentor her. The woman who headed

Lower Keys Friends of Animals of Key West, which provided free surgeries to Foley's trapped felines, taught Foley about medications, record-keeping, and adoptions.

Foley was grateful for the help she received and became a volunteer for the organization. When she offered to help others doing trap-neuter-return (TNR), "it was like turning on a fire hydrant," she says. Requests poured in. Five years ago Foley founded Venice Street Cats—a nonprofit that promotes spay/neuter for pet cats and helps people get free or low-cost spay/neuter services for ferals and strays—in Venice, Fla., with a budget of \$3,000. In 2010, its \$40,000 budget came

from donations of \$1 to \$20 from locals. The work of Venice Street Cats is also supported by many volunteers mentored by Foley, including fosterers who socialize kittens.

Since behavior remains one of the leading drivers of euthanasia of cats, early socialization is extremely important. Kittens are less likely to be stressed or have behavior and training problems, more likely to be adopted and equipped to adjust to life in their new homes, and less likely to be returned if they are fostered by volunteers with an understanding of normal kitten behavior and socialization, the process that influences behavior through exposure to

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situations involving people, other animals, and new environments.

During kittens' first eight weeks of life, learning is enhanced—likely because their nervous systems develop most rapidly at that time. That's when they acquire an expectation of what's normal in their environment, an expectation that can last a lifetime. Although opportunities missed during those weeks can sometimes be made up later, learning may take much longer.

A recent survey by Healthy Paws Pet Insurance & Foundation—conducted with adoption groups, executive directors, and board members across the United States—found that a huge number of adoption groups are highly concerned with having enough fosterers for their adoptable animals.

A good foster network can be a major ally in saving animals' lives. But some people are reluctant to foster due to concerns about providing adequate time for kittens, and some organizations are hesitant to grow their foster programs out of concern that people may not have adequate time.

These are legitimate concerns, but they're generally overblown: According to John Bradshaw, founder and director of the Anthrozoology Institute, optimum socialization to people can be achieved when kittens are 3 to 9 weeks old with only 30 to 60 minutes of gentle interaction per day. Bradshaw, who has studied the behavior of domestic cats for more than 25 years, notes that the optimum type of interaction for most kittens is being stroked and talked to simultaneously.

But fledgling fosterers do have a lot to learn before setting out on their kitty-schooling mission. Many of the veteran fosterers interviewed for this article spoke ruefully of their early mistakes—from not introducing kittens to enough visitors to not confining kittens long enough—and wanted to make sure to pass on advice not only about what to do, but what not to do. Their practical knowledge and good and bad experiences are worth their weight in kitten chow.

Maybe you're a brick-and-mortar facility that relies on volunteers to foster kittens who are ill, too young to thrive in a shelter, or for whom there is no space. Perhaps you're an unsheltered adoption group relying exclusively on volunteers to foster kittens in their homes. Either way, this article will help fosterers and cat cuddlers turn your little fur balls



Handling kittens isn't just about direct touch. Foster parents can do them a great favor by getting them accustomed to wearing a collar and tags early in life. Getting them used to this sensation discourages them from trying to remove their collar later on in their adoptive homes.

into wonderfully behaved kittens and help your adopters turn those kittens into wonderfully behaved cats.

Containing Kittens

When starting out fostering in a private home, it's a good idea to keep your foster kittens in a small space—such as a cage, crate, or a small room with doors—that's easy to kitten-proof. Because kittens seem content with a small area until they are about 6 weeks old and fosterers find it easier to work with kittens in a space with few hiding places, fosterers wisely use this time to accustom kittens to gentle handling, using their litter box and scratching post, and playing nicely. Allowing kittens to roam too soon is the mistake that Jenny Schlueter, who fosters for Tree House Humane Society in Chicago, hears about most often. "Then the peeing and hiding issues ensue," she warns.

Keeping shelter kittens confined is not just a behavior issue: Health-wise, separating them from owned pets is smart, a lesson Schlueter learned the hard way when she allowed fosters free range too early, and her pet cats came down with upper respiratory infections.

Fosterers Cindy Schneller and her husband Brian McCall prepare kittens for adoption for the SPCA Tampa Bay in Largo, Fla.

They don't introduce fosters to their owned pets for 10 days, in case the kittens are incubating an illness their pets could catch.

New fosterers may dislike the idea of putting kittens in a cage, but "that is more about the human's emotion than the cat's needs," says Foley. She cages all kittens for periods of time so that they learn not to be afraid of the cage, and will run to the front for attention rather than retreating to the back in fear. When pressed for time, Foley moves the kittens' cage nearby while she does other things around the house. She can talk to them, and they can see her and watch her interact with her own cats.

Sarah Vicary, a fosterer for Mid-Michigan Cat Rescue in Grand Ledge, Mich., and Carol Gaul, who fosters for Black and Orange Cat Foundation in Plain City, Ohio, also put fosters in cages, making sure that they put the cages in areas the kittens will find nurturing. Vicary locates the cage off her living room and kitchen so kittens learn about typical household activities. Gaul locates the cage near a window, where kittens can look outside and enjoy sunshine. The spot also allows the kittens to see and hear TV, watch people and other animals in the house, and get a whiff of good smells wafting from the kitchen.

Schneller's and McCall's kittens are kept in a separate room, with baby gates placed so that they fill the entire doorway. "With

the baby gates, the kittens can hear, smell, and sometimes see what is going on in the house,” Schneller says.

Adrienne Gallagher and her husband Barney, who foster for The Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago, also initially keep fosters in a small room so the kittens have easy access to their litter box. After dinner, the Gallaghers visit the kittens’ room to play and snuggle—with the kittens. “We find they are always happy with this setup because they have time to rest and are also happy to see us,” Gallagher says. When it’s time for bed, the Gallaghers close the door to the room. “Right away we’re teaching them about sleeping at night,” she says.

Keeping very young kittens in an extra-large crate helps Schneller teach them good potty habits; they don’t really have a choice but to use it, she says. She provides several low-sided litter boxes and makes sure the litter isn’t so deep that kittens sink into it. She cleans up accidents as quickly as possible using an enzymatic cleaner so that odors are reduced. If the kittens prefer eliminating on another surface, such as a rug, she removes the enticing item.

Beyond the Door

Kristin Ramsdell, who fosters for the Black and Orange Cat Foundation in Plain City, Ohio, believes that most kittens will let you



To encourage normal development, it’s good to provide kittens with a space that offers the chance to scratch and climb, play with toys, look out a window and be exposed to sunlight, and get used to sounds like a radio playing soft music.



Giving up kittens they’ve raised is difficult even for longtime fosterers, but the separation pangs are worth it. They know once they’ve given one group of kittens a good start in life, they can open their homes to the next ones who deserve the same chance.

know when they’re ready to explore. “They will tend to run out of the room as soon as you open the door,” she says.

“Most kittens don’t want to be isolated, and won’t put up with it for long,” says Gene Marault, a fosterer for Stray Feral Rescue in St. Paul, Minn. He hasn’t had a kitten who didn’t venture out at least to jump into bed with him at night.

When Diane Fairclough, who fosters for Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County in Santa Rosa, Calif., can enter the foster room and easily pick up a kitten, she knows he’s ready to explore. She recommends the kitten’s first experience outside his room take place when things are calm around the house. “If you have other pets, and he has not yet been introduced, put them in another room so he can adjust to a new environment first without dealing with a new critter too,” she advises.

Some fosterers introduce their kittens to one room at a time for short visits, and many place toys, beds, and other familiar items from their room into the new spaces to help the kittens feel more comfortable. Foley places shy kittens in a carrier or cage to introduce them to a new area.

Chatka Ruggiero, who works with kittens from Animal Care League in Oak Park, Ill., accompanies kittens as they explore new areas so she can reassure them and help them deal with different situations. As kittens get bigger, and depending on how brave they are, the Gallaghers gradually allow fosters to be with them in other areas of their home. “Just remember,” Gallagher says, “when they are little, you can’t expect them to be able to manage too far from their litter box.”

Ramsdell carries shy kittens and tries to get them to join their more adventurous siblings. “It’s always helpful having the shy kittens see the more outgoing kittens playing outside of the room. It tends to spark their interest and helps them get past the shyness,” she says.

If a kitten is uncomfortable in new areas, fosterers recommend returning the kitten to his safe room or cage so he can’t hide in other parts of the house.

“Kittens that hide have generally been introduced too quickly to the household,” says Fairclough. She adds that kittens should be comfortable with you and the noises of your household before leaving their safe place.



Getting kittens used to gentle human contact is an important part of socialization. Cuddling or cradling them, handling their ears and tails, pulling their lips back and touching their teeth—all this will increase their comfort with people, and prove helpful when they need to be medicated or examined by veterinary staff.

“Even after they are allowed out of their room, they still have access to that room as a safe place to run to if they get scared or uncomfortable,” Schneller says. If a kitten hides outside his room or cage, fosterers suggest enticing him with a wand toy or food on a spoon rather than dragging or flushing him out of a hiding place, which may traumatize him and cause him to bite or scratch.

Meeting the Rest of the Family

In the Marault household, as soon as kittens show signs of wanting to be integrated, they’re allowed to and encouraged to. “It’s important that they learn to be confident around other animals, and hopefully playful and interactive with them, because it makes life more fun for them all, and odds are there will be pets in their adoptive home,” he says.

Lori Riccio, who fosters for The Woburn Feral Cat Coalition in Woburn, Mass., spends at least an hour with her kittens in the morning and evening on workdays and more time on weekends. “As long as they have enough exer-

cise and interaction with humans, they usually do very well and socialize quickly,” she says.

Kittens who get along with other cats or dogs are especially desirable to adopters. Vicary notes that the transition into a new home is easier for such kittens and less stressful for adopters’ pets. Foster parents should make sure that adopters get good information on how to introduce kittens to the people and animals in their households; an unsuccessful meeting can sometimes mean a returned kitten.

Donna Mlinek has fostered only one kitten due to her husband’s allergies, but got more than her fair share of kitty wisdom when she served as feline program manager for the Dumb Friends League in Denver. She cautions against introducing fosters to owned pets unless you know the animals are good with kittens and won’t hurt or frighten them. She advises letting the kitten decide to approach, leave, escape, or hide.

Rather than trying to control a scared kitten and risk being scratched or bitten, it’s

best to control a dog with a leash, and it’s wise to cut fosters’ and pets’ nails before introductions.

The Gallaghers don’t have a dog, but invite cat-friendly dogs to visit their fosters. Such encounters are closely supervised.

Rita Bundas, who fosters for South Shore Felines in Sun City Center, Fla., lets her cats observe fosters through sliding glass doors that lead to the kittens’ sunroom, so “the introduction to our cats usually goes very smoothly, and we observe the whole time when they initially interact.”

Ramsdell is a huge advocate of introducing fosters to her cats and dogs. “I put up a baby gate to allow the kittens to see my cats and dogs. I do this for a week or so, and then allow the kittens to come out to see the gang,” she says.

Schlueter’s cats usually tolerate or ignore fosters, but because she lives in a small apartment, she returns kittens to their room if her cats get annoyed. Although Fairclough’s adult cat is used to kittens coming and going, she makes sure to give him plenty of love when she’s fostering.

Introductions to two-legged animals are important as well. Wendy Ross, a fosterer for Port Colborne Feline Initiative in Port Colborne, Ontario, Canada, knows the advantages that a well-socialized kitten has. “Sometimes people say they are looking for a certain type of kitten—a calico, tuxedo, or tabby—but they are often swayed by another kitten, the one that approaches them first in an inquisitive, friendly manner,” she says.

Kittens may initially be shy or scared when visitors come, so it’s best to bring people into the fosters’ room. If the kittens are out and about in other areas of the house, it’s easier for them to scatter and hide.

People may seem less scary if they sit on the floor or a chair rather than looming over the kittens. “Let [the kitten] hear and observe newcomers, and don’t rush handing him over to them,” says Fairclough. She advises letting kittens do the approaching and handing visitors a wand toy to break the ice.

Ruggiero’s grandchildren handle and play with fosters so kittens learn to be comfortable with kids. “Children are totally different from adults as far as noises and quickness of movement,” says Ruggiero. “So kittens need to see that side of humans also.”

The Soft Touch

By pairing food with human presence, fosterers can help kittens learn to associate people with good things.

Mlinek suggests that fosterers practice—at different times—gently scruffing kittens, squeezing their feet, cradling them, pulling their lips back and touching their teeth, and handling their ears and tails while the kittens suck on a syringe filled with baby food or diluted kitten food. This also conditions kittens to being handled for medicating and being examined by veterinary staff, she says.

Schneller and McCall hold, hug, and handle kittens a lot—especially their paws, ears, and mouth. They sit nearby and gently pet the kittens while they're focused on eating. They pick them up for a short time when the kittens finish eating, and, once they can hold a kitten, they do so briefly several times a day.

Bundas puts baby food on a spoon—rather than a finger, so that kittens don't learn to think of fingers as food—and lures kittens to come get in her lap, where she talks to and pets them as they eat.

"I'm big on kissing their little heads at an early age so they become comfortable with closeness," says Fairclough. She also cuddles

them in a blanket and strokes them with a soft brush to mimic the soothing sensation of being groomed by a mother cat. "However, when a kitten is focused on play, don't force him to be held, or he will look at cuddling as a game where he needs to 'get away' from you," she warns.

In a litter of kittens, don't allow the dominant ones to become bullies. And don't neglect your wallflower kittens—give them all equal time, says Fairclough. "You will naturally gravitate toward the kitten that is more comfortable and social, but don't forget to spend quality time with your shy or scared kitten," she says. Giving a shy kitten some time away from his siblings allows you to work with him without distractions, and can give him confidence, she notes.

Wrapping scared kittens in a soft towel can help them relax. Fairclough faces the kitten away from her. "Looking directly at him can be threatening. He'll look up at you when he's ready, and soon you'll become his friend, comfort, and food source," she says. When a kitten is frightened and prefers to hide and not be held, Riccio knows she'll need to make more time for him. She also wraps a scared kitten and only exposes his head so he feels more secure and can't escape. While watching TV, she

Resources

Free tip sheets from The Humane Society of the United States can help prevent and resolve normal cat behavior and make great handouts (humanesociety.org/animals/cats/tips).

The Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago sought input from its fosterers for its excellent *Foster Volunteer Manual*, available at bit.ly/1o2QJ9.

The San Francisco SPCA has an extensive guide to fostering (bit.ly/jwkhPL).

gently touches him until he relaxes. She notes that having the TV on low volume, as well as the radio and CD player, exposes kittens to normal sounds they'll encounter down the road.

Handling isn't just about direct touch—you can do your kittens a great favor by getting them accustomed to wearing a collar and tags early in life. Letting them get used to the sensation will help discourage them from trying to take off their collar later on in their adoptive homes.

Time to Play, Things to Scratch, Food to Munch

Fosterers also teach kittens to play nicely. Using a wand toy works well; it keeps your hands far from sharp kitten teeth and nails.

Schneller and McCall never use their hands or any toy that resembles hands and also stop playing when kittens get rough. They say they usually find that siblings and playmates are great to teach kittens to play nicely.

Fairclough never plays roughly or too energetically; that can cause playtime to get out of hand, and roughness can become an issue. If a kitten bites her, she redirects him to a toy. If he continues to nip, she stops playing and walks away.

Marault encourages rowdy kittens to play gently. "If they play too rough, biting and scratching, we whimper and draw back until the kitten understands he's caused pain, which is usually not their intent at all," he says.

Scratching objects is normal behavior, and kittens start early, so teaching them to scratch appropriately is another important



Keeping kittens confined in their own space early on, or during portions of the day, is a better strategy than allowing them to "free range" in the fosterer's home. There are far fewer hiding spots where they can get stuck, and they can't stray too far from the litter box. Nancy Peterson of The HSUS put her foster kittens in the laundry room of her home at bedtime.

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job. Schneller and McCall make sure there are plenty of scratching items available. If a kitten scratches inappropriately, they distract the kitten by clapping their hands or offering a toy. When possible, they put enticing scents on appropriate scratching items.

It's not a good idea to hold a kitten's paws to teach him where to scratch. Dragging a wand toy near and on the scratching post or box will achieve the same objective without scaring him. Providing a stable scratching post is important because kittens may be reluctant to return to one that has fallen over and frightened them.

Cats are often portrayed as finicky eaters—and some are. Schlueter warns that kittens tend to fixate on the food they are used to. Feeding a variety of flavors and textures ensures a cat with a more varied palate who will more easily adjust to whatever diet his adopter prefers in the new home, she says.

Many organizations, like the one Foley fosters for, rely on food donations. She mixes three kinds of dry food so kittens don't get

an upset stomach if an adopter changes food. Ross always provides adopters with the food her fosters have been eating so that any diet changes can be done gradually, and informs adopters if a kitten has any problems with a particular type of food.

Transporting Kittens

Owners often mention their cats' stress and fear and the difficulty of transporting them as reasons for not taking their cat to the veterinarian. Acclimating kittens to carriers makes life easier for everyone, and can help ensure that adopted kittens will get medical care when they need it.

To get kittens used to carriers, Schneller and McCall prop open the carrier door, put something soft on the bottom, and place a toy inside so kittens can explore and play in, around, and on the carrier. That way the carrier becomes familiar, not just a scary thing that appears when it's time to go somewhere. Marault leaves carriers out so kittens can hide out and nap in them and not be afraid of them later. Bundas and Gaul bring out the

carrier a few days before a car ride and place some familiar, well-liked objects inside.

When transporting kittens, fosterers put a towel or something absorbent on the carrier's floor and bring extra bedding and cleanup materials in case the kittens have an accident. Covering the floor with something soft that has the kittens' scent on it may also serve as a security blanket. Fosterers cover the carrier, except for the end facing them, with a towel or sheet and place the carrier in the car so the kittens can see them. If possible, they secure the carrier with a seat belt. Some fosterers play soft music, and others talk to their kittens. "We have found that some kittens like classical music," Gallagher says, "and almost none want any rock 'n' roll."

Sending Them Home

Gallagher and her husband work on a schedule so fosters are ready to return to the shelter when they weigh just more than 2 pounds. "At that point, we hug them and write up a profile so the potential families can read about the kittens they are looking at and learn what personality it has and what it likes and is used to," Gallagher says.

It's in a kitten's best interest to have a profile, even if your organization doesn't require it, Fairclough says. She recommends that fosterers be truthful when sharing their kittens' personalities with the organization's staff. "If you portray a kitten as outgoing and he is not, the adoption could fail."

Lynn Campisano, who fosters for HopeOhio in Columbus, Ohio, cautions adopters that kittens will need time to warm up, come out, and feel safe. She tells adopters that two weeks seems to be the magic number for kitties, so adopters shouldn't go home and expect the kitten to be cuddly right away. Patience is key.

Giving up kittens they've raised is difficult even for longtime fosterers, but Fairclough says the separation pangs are worth it. "As hard as it can be to give them up, I know that I have given these little ones a good start in life, and I can now open my home to the next little ones deserving the same chance." **AS**

Nancy Peterson is the cat programs manager at The Humane Society of the United States. She recently fostered her first litter of kittens.

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