

PAWS Humane

# Kitten Foster Guide



Everything you need to  
know about fostering  
kittens!



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# Welcome & Introduction

## Welcome to the PAWS Humane Foster Care Program!

The Foster Care Program allows PAWS Humane to take in more kittens per year than could be housed in the shelter due to limitations of space and resources. Your help will save the lives of many kittens who would be euthanized.

Generally, kittens in the Foster Care Program are those who have not yet reached 8 weeks old. These kittens are very small, and often require more individual care than they can receive in a shelter environment. It takes a lot of work and a lot of patience to care for kittens.

Fostering requires a flexible schedule and a personal commitment to the kittens. In a typical day, you can expect to give food and water to the kittens at least twice. The litter box(es) will also need scooping at least twice a day. Don't forget to allow for a little playtime and snuggling! If the kittens you are fostering are sick, you will have to medicate the kittens as well. The expected minimum time commitment is about two hours per day caring for your kittens.

Although fostering is a lot of work, it is a very rewarding experience. You get to help kittens grow from helpless little beings into confident, well-adjusted family pets. You also get the fun of raising a kitten without the responsibility of lifetime care. Most importantly, you are saving lives!

### Foster family is asked to supply...

- Healthy & safe environment
- Litter
- Transportation to & from PAWS Humane
- Socialization (family & pet interaction, leash walks)
- Kitten food (unless special dietary need)
- Interactions with toys & different noises around your house

### PAWS can provide...

- Bowls (food & water)
- Toys
- Litter pan
- Crates
- Newspapers to line crate bottoms
- Blankets, towels, and appropriate disinfectant



# Providing a Safe Environment

## The Safe Room

Choose a space that is free of things that can hurt a kitten. You must be able to control the temperature of the room—be sure there are no drafts. The kittens should be isolated from any pets other than your own, as some kitten illnesses are transmittable and occasionally fatal, even to grown cats.

The room your foster kittens are living in should be able to withstand litter box accidents, vomit, and spilled medicine. A bathroom is often a good choice for fostering (just don't forget to close the toilet lid and hide the toilet paper!).

## Kitten-Proofing

Remember that kittens are babies, and consequently they will try to get into everything! Block any electrical outlets and put away anything that a kitten could swallow or get tangled in. Hide any breakable items. Block any small holes where a kitten might hide and become inaccessible to you. It helps to lie down on your stomach so that you can see the room from the kittens' point of view and identify potential hazards. Any windows in the room should be kept closed or securely screened.

## Inside the Kitten Room

The kitten room should contain everything the kittens will need to eat, drink, eliminate, sleep and play:

- Have at least one bowl for water, one for food. It is best to provide more bowls if you have several kittens so no one has to compete to access food.
- Put the litter boxes as far away as possible from food, water, and bedding.
- Be sure to provide enough boxes so that each kitten has a clean place to eliminate.
- Old towels tend to work well as bedding. A secure sleeping area, such as a cat carrier with the door removed or a box on its side, will help the kitten feel safe—especially important for shy kittens.
- Provide safe, disposable or easily sanitized toys to entertain the kittens when you are not with them.
- Finally, some type of scratching post or cardboard scratch pad will be necessary.

# Daily Care

## Health Monitoring

It is important to monitor a kitten's health daily. If you notice anything wrong with your kittens' health, please contact PAWS Humane immediately.

## Feeding

Please feed your foster kittens only what PAWS Humane suggests. These kittens will generally be given one brand of food once they come to the adoption floor. Also, the kittens have brand new digestive systems that can be irritated by introducing too many food choices. Some human foods can be toxic to cats, so it is best to not experiment.

If your foster kittens refuse to eat, contact PAWS Humane immediately. The person you talk to will help you determine whether this is a medical problem or a preference issue and will advise you of the next step to take. Do not attempt to make this decision yourself.

# Daily Routine

## Feeding

- Kittens should be fed at least 2 times a day
- Pick up dirty food dishes
- Monitor appetites

## Cleaning Schedule

- Scoop litterbox at least 2 times a day
- Monitor diarrhea
- Clay litter should be dumped and changed every other day for 2 kittens, daily for more than 2 kittens or if the kittens have diarrhea

## Health Check

- Look over your kitten everyday for any changes or potential medical problems
- Check body and fur
- Look closely at eyes, in mouth and ears
- Check energy levels

## Playtime & Mealtime Stimulation

- Kittens should receive one to two play sessions daily with interactive toys (or more!)
- Remember to discourage play with hands
- Interactive toys should not be left unattended with kittens
- Safe solo toys such as ping pong balls should be left out at all times
- Change up the environment in small ways  
(add cardboard boxes or move things around in room)

## Socialization

- Socialize kittens a minimum of two to three 20 minute visits daily
- Undersocialized kittens, 3 to 4 20 minute visits daily
- Encourage affectionate behavior
- Kittens should meet new people a few times weekly if possible

## Handling & Gentling

- Medium or long-haired kittens especially may benefit from daily exposure to brushing in very small amounts
- Gently handling paws in preparation for nail trimming
- Exposure to being picked up



Not eating can become an emergency quickly, so please call if your kitten hasn't eaten for 12 hours!

## Cleaning Up Between Litters

When you return the foster kittens, you will need to **sanitize** the fostering room before putting new kittens in. Start by removing everything the kittens slept on, ate from, played with and eliminate it. Scrub everything the kittens could reach (don't forget the walls) with a weak bleach solution. Food and water bowls can be washed in the dishwasher; the heat will disinfect the bowls. If you don't have a dishwasher, then soak the bowls in the bleach solution for approximately 10 minutes. Clean the litter box and any reusable toys with the bleach solution as well. Wash all bedding using bleach and hot water. Throw away any toys made of cardboard or other non-cleanable materials. This should prevent any new litters from catching anything that the previous kittens contracted.

# Fostering Mom Cats With Kittens

Fostering a mom cat with kittens is a very exciting and rewarding job. You will get to see intimately how a mom cat cares for her kittens as well as the stages of development in their relationship.

## What Type of Setting Do Mom Cats Need?

A calm one! Instinct tells mom cats to keep their kittens safe and, in order to feel safe, they need privacy, quiet, and minimal activity. Stress can cause cats to become aggressive, to not take care of their babies properly, and, in some instances, even causes extreme behaviors such as cannibalism. Your role is to give the mom cat the type of environment where she can feel comfortable raising her young.

Every household that intends to foster a mom cat with kittens should have a separate room away from the hub of daily activity. A home with no other pets is ideal but, if you do have pets, you should be able to prevent your pet from going up to the door of the fostering room. Mom cat fosters are not recommended if you have a dog unless it is a very mellow and quiet dog. If your home environment is loud and/or active, such as with young children, you may want to consider a different type of foster.

**Home Introduction**—You will need to set up the room for your foster mom and babies before you let any of them out of the carrier. Ideally, you should do this before you get the mom and litter from PAWS. This room should have one or two larger “safe spaces” or nests, boxes on their sides, or an empty litterbox lined with towels, etc. Mom will want to choose somewhere to keep her kittens.

When you first let mom out, do not pet her or make too many advances. Leave her alone with the kittens to explore her new home. Adult cats can take a while to adjust to new places and mom cats are no exception. They may take a few days or more to come out of hiding.

**Litterbox**—Ideally, the litterbox will be as far away from the food and water as possible. It should have regular, unscented clay litter in it, be scooped 2 times a day, and be dumped out once weekly. Once the kittens start using the litterbox, you will likely need to add low-sided boxes that are easy for the kittens to get in and out of, and/or clean more frequently.

**Handling & Socialization**—Proceed slowly with any adult cat you do not know—let her come to you, pet her only as much as she is comfortable with, and stop petting at the first signs of discomfort. These signs may include: swishing tail, ears laid back or to the sides, head jerk towards your hand or the area where you were petting her, tensing up, cranky overdrawn meow, moving away, hissing, or growling.

Even a momma cat needs playtime. Make sure to have solo-play toys as well as interactive play sessions with mom. After kittens are 2-3 weeks old, she may show more interest in play.

# Mom's Care of the Kittens

For the first few weeks of life, mom should do everything necessary for the kittens. After that, you can start sharing some of the kitten care duties with her, if she is willing! Below is an explanation of the normal care a mom cat gives to her kittens, with an approximate timeline, so you will know what behaviors to expect. All cats are slightly different, with some being more attentive moms than others, but if a mom cat fails to care for her babies in any of these important functions, let us know as soon as possible so they can all be evaluated by staff.

**Nursing**—Kittens begin to nurse 1-2 hours after birth. Though born with their eyes closed, they can find their mother by her warmth, and she should make this easier by lying near them on her side.

The nursing/suckling relationship occurs over 3 stages:

- At first, mom initiates each nursing episode, waking the kittens by licking them and then encircling them with her body. After a little searching, kittens quickly latch on.
- The second stage occurs after the second or third week, when the kitten's eyes and ears are functioning and they can interact with mother both inside and outside the nest. At this stage, the kittens also initiate some of the nursing episodes. The mother generally cooperates by lying down and taking up the nursing position.
- In the third stage, starting at about 5 weeks postpartum, the kittens initiate virtually all nursing. The mother becomes gradually more evasive and uncooperative. Near the end of this stage, the mother begins to wean her kittens by becoming less and less available. In wild cats, this is the time when the mom would begin to provide them with fresh killed prey. You can help in the weaning process by encouraging the babies to eat canned and, later, dry food.



**Grooming**—Kittens receive a lot of grooming and licking from their mothers during their first 2-4 weeks. This anogenital grooming stimulates elimination, and the fecal matter and urine are consumed by the mom. This is effective in keeping the nest and babies clean. Later, as the young are able to leave the nest area, the anogenital licking subsides, and the young deposit feces and urine nearby. At this point, providing low-sided litterboxes nearby will teach them to use the litterbox. You generally do not need to intervene at this point.



# Problem Behaviors in Mom Cats

**Maternal Neglect**—About 8% of kittens die from inadequate maternal care. The deaths are usually due to hypothermia if the kitten strays away and is not retrieved, or improper/inadequate nursing at birth and after. Maternal neglect has several causes—some cats seem to lack maternal instincts. In some cases, it is nature's way: if kittens have birth defects or are otherwise weak at birth, the mom may ignore them, or as discussed below, cannibalize them. In many cases, it seems that environmental stress plays a role, and thus it is very important that the environment be kept quite, calm and with few visits. Cats should primarily be left alone the first 2 weeks postpartum except to feed, clean, and check in on the babies a few brief times a day.

You will need to watch them daily for signs that a mother is neglecting her young, especially in the first few weeks. Call us if:

- The mother spends all her time away from the kittens
- She does not groom or nurse them frequently
- The kittens cry and she seems to not respond

**Maternal Aggression Towards Other Animals**—Aggressive behavior towards cats or dogs is very common in mom cats, as they are trying to protect their young. Please do not try to introduce your foster cat to other animals. This can be very stressful and offers no advantages. Please block any avenues they may have for seeing other cats or dogs, and strictly enforce separation from your resident pets.

If, for some reason, the mom cat sees another animal and is upset, quickly remove the source of anxiety (cover up window, etc) and leave the room. Do not attempt to comfort or reassure the mom cat or babies. Come back in 20 minutes or so to check on them.

**Maternal Aggression Towards People**—Occasionally, mother cats have strong protective instincts against humans as well. They may hiss, growl, or strike out if you approach the kittens. We try to screen for these behaviors but sometimes they will develop down the line. If faced with this situation, move very slowly around the mom cat and the nest. Wear a long sleeved sweatshirt to protect yourself as you clean around her. Try to bribe her with tasty treats such as chicken baby food. Speak in a soft, reassuring voice, and try to not react if the mom cat hisses or growls. DO NOT correct the cat by spraying her with water or undertaking other types of correction.. Remember, she is acting out of a natural instinct to protect her young, and if you act in a threatening way, her behavior may escalate.

Call the shelter at the first sign of maternal aggression.

# General Criteria for Emergencies

## Emergency situations include:

- Continuous weight loss
- Continuous diarrhea
- Continuous vomiting
- Bleeding of any kind—nose, urine, stool
- Any trauma—hit by a car, dropped, limp, stepped on, unconscious
- Difficulty in breathing/blocked airway
- Lethargy
- Dehydration
- If the animal has vomiting or diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, it can probably wait until the next day to receive help. **However, if the animal is lethargic and shows no interest in food or water, it is wise to seek emergency help at the time.**
- Coughing or sneezing should pose no immediate problems unless accompanied by blood or symptoms such as lethargy or dehydration.



If an emergency occurs outside of PAWS Humane hours and it needs to be immediately addressed, please contact:

The Animal Emergency  
Center  
(706) 324 - 6659

You will be reimbursed up to \$200 of the cost. Please contact the PAWS Humane Vet Clinic the following day.

# Signs of Sick Kittens & What To Do

Due to the shelter environment and the fact that these kittens have very frail immune systems, kittens are prone to catching colds and other sicknesses. These illnesses range from mild to life-threatening in nature. PAWS Humane provides treatment for any illnesses that occur.

## How do I know if the Kittens are Sick?

Healthy kittens have a lot of energy when they are awake. They are playful and will only spend a short time in your lap. Their eyes and nose should be generally free of any discharge. The stool will be firm and well-shaped. Kittens eat a lot, but the amount they drink depends on how much wet food they consume (the more wet food, the less water). Kittens may sneeze occasionally. They may also scratch a little. These are normal kitten behaviors.

It is not always obvious when the kittens are sick. In nature, cats will hide any sickness so they don't appear vulnerable.

**Worms (roundworms & tapeworms)**—Worms are common in kittens. Generally, kittens are dewormed with their vaccinations when they first come in to PAWS. Roundworms look like spaghetti, and will come out in the litter box or in vomit. Tapeworms are white and segmented. Occasionally you will see the whole worm, but more often you will see what looks like dried rice stuck to the kittens' hindquarters. If you see any worms, please call the vet clinic at PAWS Humane.

**Vomiting**—Vomiting is not serious unless it happens more than once. If your kittens keep vomiting, call the vet clinic at PAWS Humane right away. If the kitten ingested something poisonous, the faster it is treated, the better the outcome.

**Eye Discharge**—It is normal for kittens to wake up with a little dark crust in their eyes. If you notice that the kittens have yellow or green discharge coming from their eyes all the time, call the vet clinic at PAWS Humane. You can treat the symptoms of an eye infection by wiping the eyes with a warm, wet towel until it is time for your appointment.

**Sneezing/Nasal Discharge**—Occasional sneezing is quite common in small kittens. If the sneezing becomes frequent, examine the discharge coming from the sneeze. If it is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be needed but it is important to monitor the kittens in case the problem gets worse. If the discharge becomes colored (e.g. green or yellow), it is time to make an appointment at the vet clinic at PAWS Humane because the kitten may have a bacterial infection. Be sure to monitor the kittens' breathing as well. If the kittens seem to be struggling to breathe or are breathing with their mouths open, call the vet clinic at PAWS Humane. Also, be sure the kittens are still eating, as a kitten won't eat what he or she can't smell.

**Lethargy**— Healthy kittens are normally active when they are awake. Sick kittens may have low energy and want to just sit in your lap. Each kitten is different, depending on their socialization level, but if you notice a drop in the kitten’s individual energy level, it is best to make a medical appointment at the vet clinic at PAWS Humane. Some undersocialized kittens will have a tendency to move less because they are frightened, so it may be difficult to monitor their energy level. If you are not sure whether your kitten is lethargic or just being quiet and still, please call the vet clinic at PAWS Humane. If a kitten can’t be roused or seems weak, this is an emergency! Call the PAWS Humane Vet Clinic immediately. If the emergency occurs after hours, call any of the approved emergency vets.

**Fleas, lice, & ear mites**—Many of the kittens we receive in the foster care system were born outdoors so they may come to us with fleas. Also, fleas are just a fact of the shelter environment. Kittens with fleas will scratch themselves a lot. Daily brushing with the flea comb and daily bedding changes will reduce and maybe even eliminate the fleas. If you see lots of fleas despite these efforts, contact the PAWS Humane Vet Clinic to decide the next step.

Lice are a different matter. You will not see the actual adult lice. Instead, you will see white dots on the kittens’ fur. If you can brush the dots off, it is dandruff. If you cannot remove the dots, then it is probably lice. Make a medical appointment and the techs will treat the lice. Lice are species-specific, and you cannot catch them.

Kittens with ear mites will scratch their ears and shake their heads a lot. Inside the ears you will see a dark discharge resembling coffee grounds. Call the PAWS Humane Vet Clinic to get the kitten treated .

**Ringworm**—Normally the fur around the lips, on the eyelids, and on the ears is a little thin. This is nothing to worry about. However, if you notice hair thinning or completely coming out in patches, call the PAWS Humane Vet Clinic. Fur loss is the first indicator of ringworm, which is a fungus that can be spread to humans and other household pets. The young, the elderly, and people and animals with suppressed immune systems are most susceptible. While it is not fatal, ringworm is itchy to people and very hard to get out of your home. Wash your hands and any clothing that you wear in the fostering room with the kittens before touching your pets.

# Establishing Good Household Behaviors

**Litterbox**—The litter box you provide for your kittens should have low sides so that it is easy for the kittens to get in and out. Plastic boxes are usually the most cost effective and easy to use because they can be sanitized often. Some foster parents prefer disposable litter boxes.

Litter boxes should be kept clean all the time. Scooping the box twice a day is a good guideline, unless you have lots of kittens or the kittens are sick, in which case, you may need to clean it more often. If you're using a plastic litterbox, make sure to dump all litter out regularly, and wash with hot soapy water. A clean box will encourage good litter box habits and will limit the kittens' exposure to germs.

Many kittens experience some litterbox problems. This can be from a medical concern (usually diarrhea) or due to the fact that the kitten is still being housetrained. Another possibility is that the kitten has too much territory, and cannot get back to the litterbox in time to eliminate there.

## A few tips:

- Keep the kittens confined to a small territory. The younger the kittens, the smaller the space should be. If they are allowed to have more space, there should be at least one litterbox in each room.
- Return the kitten to its litterbox regularly. Do not force the kitten to stay in the litter box, just gently place her near or in the box every 15-20 minutes as a reminder .
- Clean all “accidents” well with enzyme cleaners (such as Nature’s Miracle). Never yell at or otherwise punish a kitten for urinating or defecating outside the box .
- One or two litterbox misses are acceptable, but if a kitten is having repeated problems with litterbox usage, please contact the shelter.

**Discipline**—**The best way to handle most undesirable feline behaviors is to prevent them.** Kittens are at the most playful and curious stages of their lives. They are likely to explore and test the environment in ways that an adult cat may not. Many kittens will grow out of this tendency as they get older, so it's best to allow them to enact their natural kitten curiosity while trying to establish good habits.

In most cases, it's better to distract a kitten from an inappropriate behavior and direct them to something more positive. Distracting a kitten beforehand is even better because it lowers the risk that a kitten may view the distraction as a reward. You can do this by getting their attention with noise, toys or treats.

Another way to address inappropriate behavior is to modify the environment. This may involve such things as putting plants out of reach, or using double sided tape on off-limit surfaces.

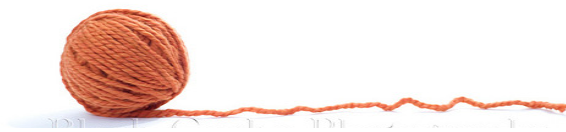
Any type of physical punishment, such as nose tapping or scruffing, is recognized by leading cat behavior experts as detrimental and counterproductive. Additionally, water bottles should not be used to correct kitten misbehaviors.

**Playtime**—Playtime is a very important part of kitten development. Kittens will need toys to play with so that they can occupy their minds as well as get exercise. It is crucial for young kittens to have other kittens to wrestle with in order to develop appropriate play skills and be properly socialized with other kittens. As long as it is medically feasible, we will be sending out kittens in pairs at a minimum. If you have only one kitten that is becoming increasingly active or starting to nip, you will want to contact the Foster Coordinator to see if the kitten can get a playmate .

**There are 2 types of toys you should provide for the kittens: solo toys and interactive toys**

- Solo toys should be easy to clean and impossible for the kittens to consume. Ping-pong balls, toilet paper tubes and wine corks are great examples of solo toys. These toys can be left for the kittens to play with even when you aren't there.
- On the contrary, interactive toys should never be left with an unsupervised kitten. These toys are great for encouraging the kittens to exercise and to enact their natural hunting skills, but if you aren't looking, a kitten could eat parts of the toy or get tangled in them. Also, kittens have been known to chew off pieces of rubber and get them caught in their intestines, so just watch them closely! Interactive toys include anything with string or parts (like buttons or feathers) that can come off and cause harm to the kitten.

Always have toys available to play with when you are visiting with your kittens. Discourage kittens from biting hands or feet and/or using body parts as toys.



**Claw Sharpening**—Encourage good habits by providing your kittens with a cardboard scratching pad. Encourage use of it by dragging toys across or up the post. Never “make” the kitten scratch by holding their paws and doing the scratching motion. Cardboard scratchers should be changed in between your foster litters (there may be some more permanent options as long as you are able to sanitize them between litters). Discourage kittens from scratching furniture by distracting them when they start, or covering the surface with a loose cloth or double sided tape (“Sticky Paws”).

# Socializing & Handling

**New People**—Many times foster kittens only get exposed to their foster parents, but ideally, they would be exposed to various people. Control the interactions so that it is a good experience for the kittens- make sure the petting is gentle, and that people use interactive toys for play.

Interacting with respectful children is also helpful. Children should always be supervised when handling kittens and should be old enough to understand how to handle kittens gently. If a kitten seems hesitant or fearful, it's best and safest to give the child other ways to interact with the kitten that are positive and safe, such as using interactive toys or hand-feeding treats.

**New Environments**—If your kittens are comfortable in the safe room and you have the ability to kitten-proof other spaces in your home, you can expose them to other rooms. Allowing the kitten to explore new spaces while having treats and interactive play available will create a positive association with these novel experiences. Keep the sessions brief and return the kitten to the safe room if they seem overwhelmed. A large dog crate or kitten playpen is another way to expose the kitten to other rooms in a safe manner. Not all kittens will be ready for these adventures, but many will benefit. You must disinfect any areas your kittens have had access to, so keep that in mind before you let them into a new space.

**New Noises**—It is beneficial to expose kittens to normal household noises as much as possible. The trick is to do it without traumatizing them. For example, start out with the TV or radio at a very low volume; if the kitten is fine with that, increase it gradually over a period of days to a normal volume. You can run the vacuum briefly on the other side of the CLOSED door to the safe room and, once the kitten is acclimated to that over time, crack the door open. This process can be repeated with other household appliances.

**Grooming & Body Handling**—It is important for young kittens to get handled frequently, so that they become accustomed to it. This will make them less defensive about different areas of their body being touched in the future and also helps prepare them for vet visits and general grooming in the future. Typically sensitive areas include toes/paws, chest and belly, and the mouth. Touch these areas in a gentle way, as part of your petting sessions.

- **Nail Clipping**—Get your kittens used to having their nails trimmed at a young age (you can have this demonstrated if you are unsure how to do this). Pet and hold their paws gently as part of their daily handling. This can be paired with a treat to help them build more positive associations.
- **Being picked up**—Make sure your kitten is picked up a few times a day or more. Try to make it a positive experience by petting the kitten and encouraging purring and affectionate behavior when holding him/her.

Thank you for fostering  
with PAWS Humane and  
choosing to save lives!



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