

Tips for Taming Feral Cats and Kittens

Although it often speeds up socialization to catch kittens early, adult feral cats and older kittens can usually be successfully socialized given a bit more time. In our experience, almost every cat can be socialized sufficiently for adoption if the time and space is available to give them this chance. Sometimes there can be no signs of progress for weeks or even months, then suddenly a change will take place,

When approaching a frightened cat:

- Speak and move slowly and calmly and avoid high-pitched sounds
- Do not make sustained direct eye contact, look down and to the side
- Watch for body language signals and back off if the cat is growling, spitting or swishing tail
- Keep fingers and fist together when approaching the cat – spread fingers resemble unsheathed claws which is a sign of aggression to cats

Patience: A lot of patience is required to socialize feral cats and kittens. Each cat or kitten will come around at their own pace regardless of their age – although generally younger kittens socialize the fastest. You have to follow the cat at their own pace and don't expect too much too soon.

Frequency: Short, frequent visits work best in the first few weeks. A five minute session twice a day will do wonders. However if the cat can see and hear humans most of the time, that is ideal. For example a cage in a veterinary clinic or in a living room of a home is better than a quiet bedroom where the cat is rarely exposed to humans. If the cat is in a quiet area, leave a talk radio station on and place T-shirts with your smell in the cage.

Confinement: Confining the cat to a cage or small room with limited hiding spaces will greatly accelerate the taming process. Ideally the cat should be at waist level where he feels less threatened by your size. A small room can be equipped with a cat tree so the cat can get up off the ground. Block off hiding places like under a bed because if the cat can retreat fully you can't initiate interactions. The cat should feel secure, so provide a cardboard box on it's side or a partially enclosed bed such as a kitty cube.

Cats that are not ready to be touched: Try using a feather wand (the feather duster kind) or a stick with a piece of soft flannel wrapped around the end to touch the cat first. First, slowly move the stick towards the back of the cat's neck. Gently start to stroke the back of the neck and head. Rub the top of the head, avoid ticklish areas such as the sides. Over a few days, move your hand down the stick each time you use it when the cat relaxes so eventually your hand is right beside the cat when you are rubbing gently. Finally, you can start touching the cat with you own hand. Distract the cat with a toy or food while you reach your hand around behind his head to touch. *Do not reach towards the cat's face with your hand*, try to sneak you hand around behind so he think it is still the stick. Rub the back of the neck and head – don't touch any other areas yet. Once the cat appears to enjoy this you are well on your way!

Treats: Feeding treats can be a good way to some cat's hearts. Others may become aggressive and try to "scare" the food out of you by lunging or spitting. In that case don't use treats, they don't work well for every cat! You can start by placing treats such as kibble, cooked deli meat, or small chunks of tuna at the front of the cage. Once the cat is comfortable eating it with you watching, try to get him to eat while your hand remains nearby. Try rubbing him with the stick while he eats the treat, and if he accepts that, rubbing with your hand.

Routine: If you can, interact with the cat at the same time each day, so he begins to anticipate your visits. Cats feel more secure when they can predict their environment. They feel insecure and therefore are more likely to be aggressive when things happen unpredictably.

Isolation: It is important to isolate the cat or kitten from other cats, because feral cats will often bond strongly with other felines, and the result is that they have no need for human comfort. If you can separate them for a few weeks they will still retain their fondness for other cats when re-introduced. It's important that the cat starts to see humans as the source of food, comfort and love.