

Home

Tips on Socializing Feral Cats and Kittens

About TAP

Taming Ferals

Foster Parenting

Featured Feline

Adopting a Pet

Resources

Contact

This process is different for every kitten or cat because each animal has his or her own unique set of experiences and temperament. Sometimes we never know the history of these animals – what obstacles they have had to overcome (abuse, loss of mother, improper weaning, medical issues, etc.). Socializing a feral *is* an undertaking, but not nearly as impossible as TNR advocates claim. You must be patient and you must put in the time and effort. There is no guarantee that the feral will respond as well as you wish, but when this does happen you will be extremely rewarded.

One thing we have learned is that there are several different approaches. You will have to see what works best for you. Your comfort level and the specific animal at hand will determine this. Some folks use gloves and some do not. Some take a more forward approach and some let the animal guide him or her as to what steps to take next. The main two areas of concern are injuring yourself and the state of mind of the feral. *We do not advocate that animals should be in a state of misery (living outdoors in a colony or hiding from fear in a home).* You can only do the best you can. If you feel the feral is not receptive enough after a reasonable amount of time, then try to find an enclosed sanctuary environment. They *do* exist, but there are not many. We have had some success in placing ferals in sanctuaries and we know others who have as well. Folks have also been known to set up fully enclosed sanctuaries in their own backyards. If these solutions are not possible, then the feral should be euthanized. **Do not release the animal outdoors or relocate the animal into an existing colony.**

Be advised that you should not commit to the socialization process if you do not have the courage to admit that things are not working and the decisiveness to follow-through when this happens. You do not want to wind up housing many, many cats. This will only overwhelm you and result in improper care of the animals. (This is irrespective of hoarding which is a mental illness). Those who regularly socialize ferals and/or rescue cats may have many felines in house at different times. We *are* trying to make the point that there may be a time when you put forth the effort to socialize a feral and find that while the feral is coming around, he/she has some limitations that may prohibit him/her from going to another home. That is ok. Or maybe you have become especially attached to this one cat. That is also ok. If the feral has a good quality of life in your home, you may decide to keep him/her. We just want to warn you that this should not become the norm. The goal is to socialize and place these cats into loving homes so you can continue your work of removing cats from the streets.

When the animal is ready for adoption, screen potential candidates well, place into the homes of folks who will keep the feline indoors, and have the new guardian(s) sign a contract that he/she/they will be responsible for regular veterinary care. You may [utilize our contract](#) or create one of your own. You may want to enlist the help of a veterinarian or a rescue group during the adoption process. You may be able to post the animal on Petfinder or utilize public listservs or post flyers or place an ad. Just make certain the animal is adopted to someone who understands the history of the cat. The animal should be fully vetted before adoption. This means spayed or

neutered and given proper vaccinations and parasite treatments, as well as tested for fatal feline diseases. You may be able to find low-cost services to help finance your expenses. Do not take on the process of socializing these animals unless you can financially commit to what you need to do for them prior to adoption.

Many TNR advocates state that there is a “critical window” for successful socialization. According to these folks, the window closes at 12 weeks. We are here to tell you that this is not the case. While the process is easier when the kittens are younger, do not rely heavily on this gauge. *You really do not know how a kitten or cat will turn out until you start the process.* Generally speaking, you should be able to handle a kitten easily that is four to eight weeks old. From eight to twelve weeks, you may need to exercise a little more caution. From three to six months, the feral may be a little more scared, but even up to nine months or so, the feral will be easier to handle than an adult cat.

Again, to match specific characterizations against the age of the feral is difficult. For example, one time we had a much easier time socializing a very scared nine-month-old kitten than a feral kitten that was trapped at about four to five months. This younger kitten was a little scared at first, but then regressed to hissing, then scratching, then biting. She was placed at a sanctuary and a short time after that she began to thrive.

Remember, scruffing is ok. Some people may disagree, but we feel folks ought to know how to do this and utilize this technique when needed. To properly restrain a kitten (or a cat), you may have to scruff the feral at the back of the neck. When done properly, the feline looks as if he or she has just had a facelift so-to-speak. **If you do not know how to do this properly, for your safety and the safety of the feline, we strongly suggest asking a veterinary technician to show you how this is done.**

When you begin, you may want to use a feather toy to stroke the kitten. (Keep in mind that sometimes the ferals are actually afraid of cat toys, as they are not used to seeing them). You may want to scruff the feral and place him/her in a towel and swaddle the feline as you would an infant. Gently stroke the feral. Try to maintain control at all times. Avoid making prolonged eye contact. Use a soft gentle voice. Refer to her by name. Baby steps are key. If you see the feral down low to the ground or displaying flattened ears, you may want to back off a bit or you may try placing a towel over his or her head and scratching the feral from behind. Do not put yourself in danger. Best to avoid getting scratched and/or bitten. If you do, **seek medical attention!** Also, if something like that happens try not to overreact. You do not want to give the feral the impression that he or she is in charge and the feral can sense how you feel by your reactions.

Positive reinforcement is the key and food is your best ally. Try a spoon dabbled in some meat baby food. Reward the kitten whenever he or she does something good. Praise the feral and give some treats.

Other things to do are to expose the kitten gradually to music and other indoor sounds. The more people the feral has exposure to from an early age the better. Otherwise you may have a very loveable lap cat one day, but he/she always runs when there is a newcomer or stranger in the home or a knock at the door.

If you are socializing two or more kittens at once, best to keep them in separate crates. If they are together, they tend to team up and be more aggressive. You want the ferals to identify with you. You are the provider of food and you are the one to give them attention. They will bond with you much faster and easier if the kittens do not have each other for company in the same crate.

When you start this process you will need a large dog kennel or crate or cage and a litter box and food and water bowls. If the container is large enough, you may be able to work around the feral to clean. If not, you will have to become good at handling the feral so you can place him or her in another carrier so you can clean. When you are dealing with an adult cat, the better environments are a small room or large multi-level cage. You may be able to start in a large crate but remember you may have to handle this cat in order to clean. If you use a small room be sure there is nothing breakable in there that is of value to you or that can hurt the feral. The adults may very well scale the side of the wall or furniture. You will be surprised at just how high they can jump! Multi-level cages work well in that you can clean around her for the most part and avoid contact when she is on one of the higher 'shelves'.

Now, if all of this simply sounds too overwhelming, please understand *we would rather prepare you for the worst-case scenario than not cover something*. Let us reiterate, this is not as bad or difficult as many TNR advocates claim. You have to use your judgment. You should talk to others who are experienced in socializing. Use common sense. You will know when you are making progress and you will know when things are not working out as planned.

Many find that a net is useful. Again, there is no one way or right or wrong way to proceed. We feel that even if you are not comfortable using a net and feel that the feral would be even more upset if you have to get a hold of him or her that way, we still recommend having one on hand for emergencies. Using a net may become necessary and better you have the net in case you ever need one. Utilize one that has soft netting material rather than plastic netting. They cost about ten dollars and are found alongside fishing gear.

Keep in mind that the feral may not even want to eat in front of you at first, especially if you have an older kitten or adult. In a matter of weeks, you may very well progress from a feral that would not eat in front of you to one that eats from your hand! At some point you will try to pet the feral. Try from behind first rather than approach from the front. A butt up in the air is a wonderful thing! When you scratch the feral and he or she sticks that rump in the air, congratulate yourself. You are well on your way!

You will notice that he or she will look for you. The feral will start to *want* your attention. The feral may vocalize more and more. Keep up the good work. Once the feral crosses that bridge in which he or she learns to trust you and understands you will not hurt him or her, the feral should learn to accept others as well. The transition to someone new may take a few weeks, but that is to be expected when placed in a new environment.

Ferals can turn into lap cats. Many do. Some may acclimate to indoor living quite well, but still never allow you to pet. This is a gamble, but we are here to tell you

the odds are in your favor.

Good Luck and Thank You for choosing a responsible option for feral cats and native wildlife.



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