



# Taming Feral or Shy Kittens

The process of taming kittens can take a few days or a few months, depending on their age and their exposure to humans before you rescued them, individual temperament even within the same litter, and their state of wildness or previous trauma. Taming a kitten, teaching it to love and trust humans, is a very rewarding process. By doing so, you are saving their life and creating a wonderful companion to a very lucky human!

The steps involved in the taming process are:

1. Initial Confinement
2. Periodic and brief handling
3. Bathroom Confinement
4. Exposure to other humans
5. Adoption

## Initial Confinement

Kittens under 8 weeks of age “tame up” very quickly. Usually within a few days. Remember that you are a big-scary-human to them and they have been through some major life changes in a few short days. They may hiss and spit and smack at you, but remember it is only out of fear, not aggression.

*ALL BITES ARE SERIOUS. IF BITTEN SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION AND QUARANTINE THE KITTEN.*

8-12 weeks of age is manageable, but will take a little longer. Over 12 weeks, you will need to have patience if the kitten has never been around people. If it was being fed at a feral feeding station, it will already have learned the people = food = good.

If mama is feral, it is best to separate them as soon as the kittens are weaned. Otherwise the kitten will pick up on mama’s fear and take longer to trust you.

Kittens should be separated from other cats (your pets or other fosters) until they have been tested for contagious diseases. Kittens can typically be tested at about 2lbs or 8 weeks of age. Keep the kitten isolated until it has been tested, wash your hands after handling, and wear a smock or change your clothes to protect against the spread of disease to other pets. Most likely the kittens are fine, but you should not risk the health of your own pets or other fosters.

If the kitten was trapped, transfer it from the trap into a cage or large pet carrier. Have the new “home” prepped with a litter box, food, water, and bedding. Keep the cage partially covered, to help it feel safe. Keep other pets and children away from them so they can adjust to their new surroundings.

**For the first night,** leave the kitten alone to calm down, adjust, and relax in its new surroundings.

**For the first two days,** do not handle the kitten, but make frequent visits to talk softly and get it use to your presence. Move slowly and confidently. Do not stare at the kitten, as this may feel threatening to them.

Food and water and bedding should be placed in the cage or carrier. Many cages and carriers have food and water bowls attached to the doors so that you can feed and water the kittens without having to place your hand inside. If you do not have a cage, or your carrier is too small for a litter pan, place the kittens in a small room, like a bathroom, in the carrier. Place the litter box in the room and leave the carrier door open so that the kittens have access to the box. (If you are working with CC4C, ask your sponsor if you can borrow a cage from one of our members.)

Young kittens appreciate having fuzzy bedding and a cat bed that has a lip to it. They can curl up in this and feel safe and protected and the fuzziness reminds them of mama and safety. Do not give them a box with one opening to hide in, you do want them to be able to see you and be easy to reach when you are ready to handle them.

# Handling

**After 2 days**, select the least aggressive kitten, place a towel over it to pick it up or use leather gloves (welding gloves are good because they are long). If you can avoid it, do not approach from the front as a hand coming towards them and reaching over their head can be frightening and cause them to hiss or bite.

If the kitten remains calm, grip it securely by the nape of the neck, put the towel on your lap and set it on the towel. Or snuggle the kitten in the towel or against your chest (if they are calm) to help them feel safe and secure. (See pictures below.) Stroke it gently on the head and speak softly and gently to the kitten. Then move to stroking the whole body, then release. Make this first physical contact brief. Go through this process with each kitten. The stroking and petting action imitates the action of the mother grooming the kittens and will help the kitten start to transfer its need for parental love to you.

After all have been handled, give them a special treat. Baby food or Hills "a/d" brand canned food off a spoon is always a great ice-breaker. Repeat this process as frequently as possible.

Once you feel comfortable handling the kitten, check it for fleas and remove them as soon as possible. Kittens over 6 weeks of age can be treated with Advantage or Frontline (per the manufacturer's instructions). If there are only a few fleas, it would still be best to comb them out or pick them off. Under 6 weeks of age, you must do this as they are too young for the topical treatment. Kittens become anemic from flea infestation and can easily fall prey to illnesses in this condition. Combing with a flea comb also helps the bonding process.

Mimic the grooming action of the mother when holding and petting kittens. Take your thumb and forefinger and gently "pull" small areas of hair around the kittens face and ears. For optimum experience, you can moisten your fingers for a realistic experience for the baby kitten! They really think that you are grooming them and that you are their mother.

Play with the kittens using "kitty tease" toys (a tiny piece of cloth tied to a string which is tied to a small stick), wand toys, or lightweight cat toys. Leave only plain toys with kittens when they are unattended; ones without loose strings, small feathers, plastic ears or eyes, which could be chewed off and ingested. Don't leave string alone with the kittens because they can swallow it and this can be fatal. Young kittens should not be given toys with catnip in them.



**Advanced Bundle Mode:** In a flannel pillow case with only his head peeking out so that he can't wiggle, secured around his neck with a hair clip. Here you are really in control since he can't wiggle his legs out and try to make a run for it.



**Robe Snuggle Mode:** Wrap kitty in your robe or sweatshirt. Kitty will feel safe and secure, feel your body warmth and heartbeat, get use to your smell, and will learn to relax with you. Do this as often as you can, especially if you are sitting down to watch tv or a movie. Give a kitten to each family member to snuggle while watching the movie.

## Bathroom confinement

Within a week you should see considerable progress with young kittens and they can be moved into a bathroom. Older kittens may need more time in the cage or carrier. Each kitten will develop at a different rate.

Why a bathroom? Very few hiding places. In most bathrooms, the only hiding place is behind the toilet, which is still easily accessible to you, the “kitten tamer”. Bedrooms, offices, laundry rooms all have too many places for a kitten to hide and trying to chase or pull them out recreates the scary-human-situation.

***Remember to “kitty-proof” the bathroom first:*** *When spooked, scared little kittens have an amazing ability to squeeze into the smallest spaces that you would never have thought of. Is there any gap beneath your bathroom vanity that should be blocked? Is there space between the pipes where they go into the wall? Even a 2” diameter hole could be deadly to a kitten. Remove all breakable items or things that could be knocked over, such as vases, soap dispensers, toothbrush holders, soap containers, etc. Keep the toilet seats in the down position at all of the time. Use non-clumping litter and place the food and water far from the litter.*

If there is one kitten that is not taming, place it in a separate cage in another room, away from the others. This will allow you to work with it more frequently and will increase its dependence on a humans for attention. It will also prevent perpetuation of wildness in the litter-mates.

When is the kitty ready to move to a larger room? If the kittens approach you, climb into your lap, don’t run and hide, then they are ready to graduate to a larger space. Before you move them, kitten-proof the room as much as possible (see our [Dangers List page](#)). Remove clutter, beware of mini-blinds and their cords, lightweight breakables (vases, lamps, etc.), curtains (great for climbing!) or other things you don’t want the kitten(s) getting into. Block access to behind bookcases and heavy furniture behind which the kitten can become wedged.

## Exposure

When the kittens no longer respond by biting and scratching, encourage friends to handle them as often as possible. It is very important that they socialize with other humans and learn that all humans offer love and attention. Feral cats tend to bond with one human so they best adjust to a new home if they are socialized with other humans before being adopted out.