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**FOSTERS: KITTEN CARE MANUAL**

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**Thank you for opening your home and heart to some of our kittens! Sending kittens that are too little for adoption into foster care allows them to grow up in a stress-free environment and also frees up space at the adoption center so that we can help more cats in need. Your role as a foster parent is essential to our mission- we couldn’t do it without you!**

**Time Commitment for Foster Kittens**

Duration of Foster: 1-4 weeks

If you can’t commit to fostering the kittens until they are ready for adoption, that’s fine! You can bring them home for a week or two. When you need to return them, we’ll find them a different foster home.

Daily Commitment: 2 hours (minimum) Socializing kittens is a big part of being a foster parent. Plan to spend at least two hours a day caring for and socializing the kittens. Get the whole family involved and take turns in the kitten room.

**Prepare the Kitten Room**

Before you bring foster kittens home from the shelter you will want to prepare the room where they will be staying. The kitten room could be a spare bedroom, bathroom, or office. Kittens should never have free run of the house. They can get lost, confused and get into trouble in too large of a space.

Make sure the kitten room meets the following criteria: (from Charleston Animal Society Manual)

● A space where temperature can be controlled   
● The space that can be disinfected by using mild bleach solution (1-part bleach to 32 parts water).   
● Separate from other household pets   
● Can withstand kitty messes: litter box accidents, vomit, spilled water, etc.   
● No breakable items.   
● Electrical outlets and wires are blocked.   
● No small items that could be ingested.   
● Secured windows (closed or with a secure screen).   
● Secured appliances (toilet lids closed).

If possible, choose a space that is inviting to you as well. The more comfortable the kitten room is for you, the more likely you are to hang out there. Ideally you want to spend a couple hours a day with the kittens, so a comfy chair, work desk or television might me a nice addition to the kitten room.

**Kitten Essentials**

You should have all of these supplies on hand when bringing home foster kittens. We can get you started with a little food, litter or toys when you pick up the kittens. Just ask!

● Litterbox (with a low entry point)   
● Non-clumping litter (for kittens less than 6 weeks old)   
● Scratching post   
● Cozy bed and blankets   
● Toys (pipe cleaners make great, inexpensive toy)   
● Interactive wand toy   
● Toothbrush (to encourage grooming)   
● Sturdy food and water bowls (stainless steel or ceramic)   
● Dry kitten food   
● Variety of canned food (pate for younger kittens)

**Frequently asked questions**

**What do foster families need to provide?**

Foster families need to provide:

* A healthy and safe environment for their foster kittens
* Transportation to and from Foster Checks and any vet appointments as needed
* Socialization and cuddle time to help teach the kittens about positive family and pet relationships

**How much time do I need to spend with the kittens?**

As much time as you can. The more time you spend with your foster kittens, the more socialized they will be to people. The amount of time required for feeding will vary depending on the age of the kittens you are fostering. Very young kittens need to be bottle-fed every two to three hours, while older ones may be eating on their own and needing to be fed just a couple times a day.

**Can I foster kittens even if I have a full-time job?**

Yes. The foster coordinator will match you with kittens appropriate for your schedule. We will need you to be available, however, to take the kittens to a vet appointment if they are sick.

**How many kittens will I be fostering?**

We like to have at least two kittens in a foster home so they can socialize with and learn from each other. Sometimes there are special circumstances in which a kitten goes to a foster home alone, but it’s usually for a medical or behavioral reason. The decision is made by the foster coordinator.

**How long will the kittens need to be in foster care?**

Once a kitten weighs two pounds, he/she can be spayed or neutered and then put up for adoption. If you are fostering a litter of kittens, we will try to keep at least two of the kittens together for the surgery, but we want to get everyone spayed or neutered and ready for adoption as early as possible.

**What is my role before and after the kittens’ spay/neuter surgery?**

Once kittens reach 2 lbs, please contact the foster coordinator. We will schedule surgery as quickly as we can.

After the kittens’ surgeries, you can choose to pick them up so they can recover in your home for a few days, or they can come to the Cat Lounge. You will be given a foster animal biography form to fill out so you can tell potential adopters about any special or fun personality traits that the kittens have or anything else that you think adopters would want to know about the kittens. As you would expect, kittens are usually adopted quickly.

**Will I need to give medicine to the foster kittens?**

While we do our best to ensure that we are sending out healthy kittens to foster care, most illnesses have incubation periods, meaning that if the kittens picked up something at the shelter, symptoms can arise after you take them home. So, some kittens do not require any medicine, while others do. If your foster kittens need medication, we can show you how to administer it before you take the animals home.

**Can I let my foster kittens play with my personal pets?**

Kittens are very susceptible to illness and can carry or catch dangerous ailments easily. For this reason, we require that foster parents isolate foster kittens with their own supplies for at least two weeks to try and ensure that the kittens are healthy prior to exposing them to your personal pets. We also advise that you consult with your veterinarian before fostering to ensure that all of your personal pets are healthy and up-to-date on all vaccines. If, for any reason, your personal pet becomes ill while you are fostering a Best Friends pet, we cannot provide medical care for your personal pet.

Never leave your personal pets unsupervised around the foster kittens.

Important note: If your personal cat is allowed outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster kittens. Kittens are very vulnerable to illness and we want to limit their risk by not exposing them to anything from the outdoors.

**Will any of my foster kittens die?**

Sadly, kittens are fragile, so it is always possible for them to become ill and pass away while in a foster home. This may be the hardest thing about fostering kittens. If it’s something you don’t want to encounter, then fostering kittens may not be the best fit for you. But please keep in mind that without foster homes, most of these kittens would not stand a chance of survival in a shelter. You’re helping to save lives.

**Who will take care of my foster kittens if I need to go out of town?**

If you have travel plans while you are fostering kittens, you will need to contact the foster coordinator and make arrangements to move your foster group to another foster for the duration of the time that you are gone. Please provide at least one week’s notice to ensure that we have space for your kittens. If your trip is over a holiday, please provide a minimum of two weeks’ notice.

You cannot leave your foster cat with an unauthorized person or pet sitter. We have specific training for foster parents, and pet sitters have not undergone that training or signed the release waivers for the foster program.

**What if a foster kitten bites me?**

If any of your foster pets bite you and break skin, causing you to bleed, you need to report the bite to the foster coordinator within 24 hours of when the bite occurred. The law requires that we report all bites. The teeth of the animal, not the nails, must have broken the skin. If you are unsure, then please report the bite anyway.

**What if I want to adopt one of my foster kittens?**

If you want to adopt a foster kitten, you will need to complete an adoption application and follow the full adoption process. Fosters always get first dibs

**What if I know someone who’s interested in adopting one of my foster kittens?**

If someone you know is interested in adopting one of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator as soon as possible, because once the kittens are up for adoption, we cannot hold them for anyone. However, we do want to accommodate referrals from foster parents if we can.

**Will it be difficult for me to say goodbye to my foster kittens?**

Saying goodbye can be the most difficult part of fostering, but remember that we always have more kittens who need wonderful foster homes. Keep in mind that by fostering these vulnerable pets, you are playing a crucial role in helping to save lives.

**Caring for your foster kittens**

Because kittens are fragile, it is important for you to watch the behavior of your foster kittens closely and monitor their health daily. To keep track of their health, keep a journal of the kittens’ weight, eating habits and overall health. You should weigh the kittens daily to ensure that they are growing, and record the weight in the journal.

Watch for signs of illness, including frequent crying, restlessness, weakness, coldness (hypothermia), diarrhea, dehydration, shallow or labored breathing, paleness or blueness in color. Notify the foster department immediately if a kitten is losing weight, is cold to the touch, or is having trouble breathing (either shallow or heavy breathing).

Kittens are susceptible to illness, so foster kittens must be kept indoors. If your personal cat has access to the outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster kittens. Also, please do not let your foster kittens ride loose in a car. Use a carrier at all times to transport kittens to and from appointments.

**Caring for bottle-fed kittens**

Bottle-feeding neonatal kittens requires an around-the-clock commitment. Thank you so much for offering your time and attention to these fragile babies. And please remember that we are here to support you. Here’s some general info about bottle-feeding.

**Milk preparation.** You can pre-mix enough formula to last for 24 hours of feeding, but it must be refrigerated at all times. Discard all unused and mixed formula after 24 hours. Only heat enough formula for each feeding, and throw away any uneaten warmed formula after each feeding. Do not re-use warmed formula because harmful bacteria can develop in it.

**Bottle-feeding tips.** It is easier to feed your kittens when they are gently wrapped in a towel or blanket, instead of just using your hands. The towel or blanket is softer and warmer than your hands, and being wrapped up makes the kittens feel safer as they eat. If the kitten allows it, the forelegs should be free to allow him to “knead” with his feet. This kneading activity is essential to the kitten’s muscle development and helps aid in digestion of the kitten’s food. Also, be careful to position the kitten so that his belly is toward the floor. To decrease the chance of formula being aspirated into the lungs, kittens should not be fed on their backs.

**Latching on.** It may take a couple tries for a kitten to latch on to the bottle nipple. Just be patient; sometimes kittens need some encouragement to eat. Make sure that the nipple you are using on the bottle has an adequate flow of milk. When the nipple tip is punctured with a sterile needle, formula should drip out (one drop at a time, not a stream) when the bottle is inverted 180 degrees. Do not hesitate to call the foster department if you need any help or assistance with feeding your kittens. We are always here for you, ready to answer any questions that you may have.

**Aspiration.** If liquid bubbles out through the kitten’s nose or he starts coughing, he may have gotten formula in his lungs. Pat the kitten very gently on the back to elicit a cough or sneeze, or hold him in an inverted position, tail over head, for a moment to remove the formula from his lungs. Please notify the foster department if this happens so we can determine if antibiotics or a vet visit is needed.

**Peeing and pooping.** Bottle-fed kittens need help with elimination, so you’ll need to stimulate your kittens to pee and poop. After you feed them, wipe each kitten’s back end with a baby wipe or warm wet cotton ball. Remember to do this every time you feed them. Document the color and consistency in your journal. Kittens should urinate after every meal and should poop at least once a day. The normal color of kitten poop is various shades of mustard and the consistency is similar as well. When a kitten is first introduced to formula, it is normal for him or her not to poop for 48 hours.

**Signs of illness.** Watch for signs of illness, including frequent crying, restlessness, weakness, coldness (hypothermia), diarrhea, dehydration, shallow or labored breathing, paleness or blueness in color. Notify the foster department immediately if a kitten is losing weight, is cold to the touch, or is having trouble breathing (either shallow or heavy breathing).

**Keeping kittens warm.** When kittens are infants (less than two weeks old), they can be kept in small carriers or playpens that can easily be covered by a blanket to maintain heat and reduce draftiness. As they grow and become more mobile, they will need more space to roam and play. Also, don’t forget that kittens cannot regulate their body temperatures, so please keep a SnuggleSafe disc warm and with them at all times. Because kittens’ skin is very sensitive and prone to thermal burns, the warming disc must be covered by a blanket and puppy pad that the kittens cannot burrow under.

**Weighing.** Please weigh the kittens before and after each feeding to ensure that they are growing, and record the weights in the journal.

**Weaning kittens**

Once your kittens are about four weeks old, it is time to start the weaning process. Your goal is to have the kittens eating on their own consistently by the time they’re adopted. So, beginning at four weeks, start offering warm gruel (two parts wet food, one part formula) at all times, along with dry kitten food and water. Every four to six hours, discard any uneaten gruel and provide a fresh batch.

You will still be supplementing the kittens with a bottle every eight hours to ensure that they are getting all the nutrients they need, but encourage them to eat gruel before you offer a bottle. To get a kitten interested in trying the gruel, you may have to offer the gruel with a spoon or use your finger to place a small amount on the kitten’s tongue. Ideally, by the end of five weeks, your foster kittens will be happily eating dry and wet food on their own.

It is important to continue weighing your foster kittens every day, after each feeding, to ensure that they are always gaining weight. During the weaning stage, you should also begin introducing the kittens to the litter box because they should be able to eliminate on their own by about four weeks of age.

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| **Making formula**  Mix two parts water with one part formula. Mix the powder and water until all clumps are gone. Remember, mixed formula only lasts for 24 hours.  **Making gruel**  Mix 1/2 can of wet food with 1/4 can of formula per kitten. You can add a little water if the kittens seem to like a looser consistency. It’s OK make gruel in bulk and refrigerate it, but you’ll need to warm it before offering it to the kittens. |

**Caring for independent eaters**

By six to seven weeks old, your kittens should be independent eaters. Dry food should be their primary source of food, but offer wet food frequently as well to encourage eating and maximize growth. Replace the water in their water dish twice a day and wipe out the dish if needed.

During this stage, your daily responsibilities include socializing the kittens and exposing them to new situations and environments. It’s important to try and keep all experiences positive for the kittens, so give them lots of treats and toys as they learn about new sounds, smells, places and faces. See [Section 7](https://resources.bestfriends.org/article/kitten-foster-manual#Socializing) for more tips on how to successfully socialize your kittens.

As always, watch the behavior of your kittens and monitor their health daily. Continue to keep a journal detailing each foster kitten’s weight, appetite, energy level and overall health. Weigh the kittens once a day, preferably around the same time, to minimize the variables when tracking the kittens’ growth. Look over each kitten every day for physical changes or potential medical problems.

Now that the kittens are using a litter box, be sure to scoop the box at least two times daily. Every other day, dump the litter, clean the box with a mild detergent (such as dishwashing liquid) and put in fresh litter. You’ll want to monitor the kittens for diarrhea, and clean the litter box more frequently if diarrhea is apparent.

At this stage, play with the kittens several times a day with interactive toys. Play time provides stimulation, encourages socialization and releases excess energy. Try a variety of toys (balls, squeaky toys, feather toys, etc.) to see which ones your foster kittens like. Cat toys don’t have to be fancy or expensive. Cats often enjoy playing with something as simple as a paper bag (remove the handles for safety) or a box with holes cut in the sides.

Don’t leave your foster kittens alone with any toys that could be easily ingested or cause harm to them. Examples are string toys, yarn and Da Bird (feathers dangling from a string and wand). Toys such as ping-pong balls and toilet paper tubes are safe. Also, it may seem cute, but discourage your foster kittens from play-biting your hands and feet. This is something that adopters may not find desirable.

**Cleaning up between litters**

Once you’ve returned your group of kittens to Best Friends for adoption, you must sanitize your fostering room or area before you can take home a new batch of kittens. Remove anything the kittens touched and clean it with a weak bleach solution, consisting of one part bleach to 32 parts cold water.

If you have items that can be washed in the dishwasher, please do so since the heat will disinfect those items. Plastic or metal items that need to be sterilized, such as litter boxes or plastic toys, should be soaked in the bleach solution for 10 minutes and then rinsed off. Wash all bedding with bleach and hot water, and throw away any toys that cannot be sterilized. Being conscientious about sterilization will help ensure that your next foster group will not catch any illnesses from the previous group of kittens.

**Fostering moms and kittens**

Mother cats, also known as “queens,” need to be in a calm environment so that they can be stress-free and feel like they are keeping their kittens safe. Sometimes, stress can cause a mother cat to become aggressive or to not care for her babies properly. With that in mind, choose a private and quiet room of your home, away from the daily activities of your family, in which to situate the mother cat and her kittens.

It’s also important that they be kept away from other pets in the home. Other pets can be perceived as a threat by the mother cat and cause her to act aggressively to protect her young. If you have children and an active home, it may be best to foster when the kittens are four weeks or older. Sometimes mother cats will behave less defensively if their kittens are older.

**Bringing everyone home**

Set up your fostering room before you bring the mother cat and her kittens home. You should put the litter box as far away from the mother cat’s food and water bowls as possible, and provide a couple of different safe places where she can care for her kittens. A dark area equipped with a whelping box is ideal.

A whelping box is a box that is large enough for the mother cat to lie on her side slightly away from her kittens with all of the kittens in the box with her. The box should have sides high enough to prevent the kittens from wandering away, but low enough so it’s easy for the mother cat to come and go as she needs to. Lining the bottom of the box with puppy pads topped with newspapers will help absorb moisture. You can place an easy-to-clean blanket on top of the absorbent materials to give the mother cat and kittens a soft place to lie on. Please keep all these materials dry so that the kittens are not chilled by dampness. Do not place straw, hay or shavings in the area where the mother and kittens are kept.

When you bring your foster kittens and their mom home, put them all in the fostering room and close the door, allowing the mom to explore on her own. Give her a couple of hours before you enter her room and don’t be alarmed if it takes a few days for her to stop hiding.

**Mom’s care of her kittens**

The momma cat should take care of her kittens by herself for at least three to four weeks before she starts the weaning process for her babies. Each momma cat that you foster will be slightly different in her level of attentiveness, but there are three basic stages of nursing (see below). If for any reason your momma cat is not performing one of the listed functions, please notify the foster coordinator right away to evaluate whether the mom has a medical concern that we need to address.

Kittens are born blind, but they can feel their mother’s heat and seek her out to begin nursing within two hours of being born. Mother cats should be lying on their sides to ensure that their kittens can find the nipples for nursing. Here are three stages of nursing:

* One to two weeks old: The mother cat initiates nursing by licking her kittens to wake them up and curling her body around them. After she wakes all of her babies, the kittens search for a short time period and then quickly latch on.
* Two to three weeks old: The kittens’ eyes and ears begin to function and they start to explore beyond the nesting area. This is when the kittens start interacting and playing with their mother. At this age, the kittens start to initiate some of the nursing and momma should comply by lying in the nursing position.
* Four to five weeks old: The kittens begin weaning and, in turn, the mother cat no longer initiates any nursing. If the mother cat still allows the kittens to nurse, it will be initiated by the kittens and can be lateral or upright nursing.

Occasionally, mom cats develop mastitis when their kittens stop nursing and begin to eat on their own. Mastitis occurs when the mammary glands inflame and harden, creating a very painful infection for the mother cat and causing symptoms such as a fever and listlessness. If you think your mother cat may have mastitis, call the foster coordinator on the next business day. This is not an emergency condition.

The mother cat will groom and lick her babies frequently for the first two to four weeks. She will stimulate her kittens to pee and poop, and will generally consume the fecal matter and urine. As the babies become more mobile, they will start to leave the nest and deposit urine and feces nearby, which is a good time to start introducing a couple of low-sided litter boxes (disposable tend to work best).

To ensure that the mother cat has enough to eat, give her access to both wet and dry food at all times. Food intake for a nursing mother can be two to four times the amount eaten by a cat who’s not nursing.

When fostering a momma cat, it is very important to observe her behavior daily and watch her interactions with her kittens to spot any problems. Unfortunately, 8 percent of kittens pass away because of inadequate maternal care. This can happen for many different reasons, some of which are beyond our control.

**Problem behaviors in momma cats**

Here are some details about problem behaviors in momma cats and what you can do about them.

**Maternal neglect.** Sometimes a mother cat stops providing care to one or all of her kittens. The neglect may be because of a birth defect or weakness in the kitten; she may just be trying to follow nature’s course, focusing her attention on the stronger kittens. Neglect may also happen because she is inexperienced or she’s in a stressful environment. Either way, that’s why it’s so important to make daily observations to ensure that she is caring for her babies. If she will let you handle the kittens, you should weigh each kitten once a day to ensure that they are gaining weight. If you notice that she is spending all of her time away from the kittens, is not grooming or nursing them frequently, or doesn’t respond to their cries, please call the foster coordinator right away.

**Maternal aggression toward other animals.** Aggressive behavior directed at other animals is common and expected from mother cats because they have a maternal instinct to protect their young at all times. With that in mind, please do not try to introduce her to the other animals in your home. As mentioned above, the mom cat and her kittens should have a quiet room of their own away from all other pets so that she and her babies can always feel safe. If she has seen another animal and becomes stressed or aggressive, it is very important to leave her alone and not try to comfort her. Give her 20 minutes or so to calm down and then check on her.

**Maternal aggression toward people.** Sometimes mother cats will act aggressively toward people. These behaviors may include hissing, growling, swatting and biting. Again, the mother is merely trying to protect her young. We evaluate mom cats for these behaviors before sending them into foster homes, but sometimes the behaviors develop later. If you have a mother exhibiting these behaviors, do not try to “correct” the behavior with a spray bottle or any type of punishment. She is only acting out of instinct to protect her babies and you could cause her aggressive behavior to escalate.

Contact the foster coordinator at the first sign of any of the above behaviors so we can assess the situation and decide on the safest option for momma and her babies.

**Separating kittens and moms**

If all of your foster animals, mom included, are healthy and friendly, we have no reason to separate mom from kittens before they are eight weeks old. But there are a few medical or behavioral reasons for separating them earlier than eight weeks:

* As mentioned above, if the mother cat is showing signs of maternal neglect and is no longer caring for her kittens, the foster coordinator may decide to separate her from her kittens.
* If the mother cat is semi-feral or very undersocialized, we may decide to separate the kittens once they are eating on their own consistently and no longer need to nurse (around four to five weeks old). Separating them would prevent the kittens from learning feral behaviors from their mother and help them to become socialized, which increases their chances of finding forever homes.
* If there is a medical concern about the mom or babies, a veterinarian could make the decision to separate the kittens from the mother cat.

The kittens’ best chance at survival is to stay with their mom. Please do not separate your foster kittens from their mom for any reason, or attempt to supplement the mother’s milk with formula, without consulting the foster coordinator.

**Veterinary care**

Kitty Queen Cat Rescue provides all medical care for our foster animals at our approved veterinary clinics. Because we are ultimately responsible for your foster animals’ well-being, our staff must authorize any and all treatment for foster animals at our approved veterinary partners.

If your foster kittens need to go to the veterinarian, please notify the foster coordinator by phone.

For non-emergency situations, please understand that our veterinary partners book quickly and may not be available for same-day appointments. We ask that you schedule basic non-emergency appointments at least 24 hours in advance.

Remember, foster parents will be responsible for payment of any medical care if they take their foster animal to a veterinarian without authorization from the foster coordinator or adoptions manager.

**Signs of illness and what to do next**

Kittens do a good job of masking when they don’t feel well, so determining if a foster kitten is under the weather will require diligent observation of the kittens’ daily activity and appetite levels. Be aware that kittens act differently at different ages. For example, a healthy two-week-old kitten will sleep often and get up only to nurse, whereas a healthy six-week-old kitten should have a lot of energy. If you have any questions about the health of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator, who will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

**Eye discharge.** It is normal for kittens to have some discharge from their eyes when they wake up. But if a kitten has yellow or green discharge, or swelling around the eyes (making it hard for him to open his eyes), or the third eyelid is showing, you need to contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

**Sneezing and nasal discharge.** Occasional sneezing is common in kittens. If the sneezing becomes more frequent, examine the discharge coming from the sneeze. If the discharge is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be necessary. But it is important to monitor the kittens in case the problem becomes worse. If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment because the kittens may have a bacterial infection. Be sure to monitor the kittens’ breathing. If they start to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator immediately and follow the emergency contact protocol. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the kittens’ eating habits more closely to ensure that they are still eating. And, of course, continue to weigh them daily.

**Loss of appetite.** Your foster kittens may be stressed after arriving in your home, and stress can cause lack of appetite. Unwillingness to eat in kittens can be very serious, so pay close attention to whether the kittens are eating. Kittens should eat on a four- to eight-hour schedule, depending on their age. If a kitten under four weeks old misses two meals or a kitten over four weeks of age goes more than 12 hours without eating, the foster coordinator should be called. Also, if a kitten less than eight weeks old does not urinate for over 12 hours, call the coordinator. With a kitten who is not eating, please do not change the kitten’s diet without contacting the foster department. An abrupt change in diet can cause diarrhea, which will lead to dehydration.

**Lethargy.** The activity level of your kittens will vary with each kitten in your litter and with age. Sick kittens may have lower energy levels and just want to sit in your lap or on the floor and not move much or play. If you notice a drop in your foster kittens’ energy level, please contact the foster coordinator to make a medical appointment. If a kitten cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, this is an emergency, so you’ll need to start the emergency contact protocol. Note: Some undersocialized kittens will move less because they are frightened. If you have a fearful group of kittens, it can be more difficult to determine if their energy levels are low. But tracking all behaviors in your journal will help you decide whether you should call the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

**Dehydration.** Dehydration is usually associated with diarrhea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite. To test for dehydration, gently pinch the kitten’s skin around the scruff area. If the skin stays taut, the kitten is dehydrated. Please call the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency contact protocol, as dehydration can be fatal in kittens.

**Vomiting.** If a foster kitten has thrown up two or more times in one day, please notify the foster coordinator. If there is bile or blood in the vomit, please call right away.

**Pain or strain while urinating.** When kittens first go into a foster home, they may not urinate due to stress. If a kitten hasn’t urinated in more than 24 hours, however, please contact the foster coordinator. Also, if you notice the kitten straining to urinate with little or no results, or crying out when urinating, please contact the foster coordinator immediately because it may be indicative of an infection or a urethral obstruction, which can be life-threatening.

**Diarrhea.** In kittens, it can be tricky to determine if diarrhea is a problem. Soft stool diarrhea, most likely caused by stress, is normal for the first two days after you take kittens home. Kittens who are nursing tend to have loose stool, but if it is watery or very large in volume, that’s a concern. By the time kittens are five weeks old and are eating consistently on their own, they should have firm, normal stool. If your foster kittens have liquid stool, please contact the foster department so that a vet appointment can be scheduled; the kittens may need medication.

Once your kittens are using a litter box, please monitor the box daily. Remember that diarrhea will dehydrate your kittens, so be proactive about contacting the foster department if you notice any diarrhea. If a kitten has bloody or mucoid diarrhea, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol.

**Frequent ear scratching.** A foster kitten may have ear mites if she scratches her ears often and/or shakes her head frequently, or if you see a dark discharge that resembles coffee grounds when you look in her ears. Ear mites can be treated by a veterinarian, so please call or email the foster coordinator for a medical appointment.

**Hair loss.** Please contact the foster department if you notice any hair loss on your foster kittens. It is normal for cats to have thin fur around the lips, eyelids and in front of the ears, but clumpy patches of hair loss or thinning hair can indicate ringworm or dermatitis. It is important to check your foster kittens’ coats every day.

**Serious kitten ailments**

Kittens are susceptible to these illnesses:

* Fading kitten syndrome: Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, dehydration, lethargy, weight loss, coldness to the touch, and difficulty with breathing or labored breathing.
* Panleukopenia (feline distemper): Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, vomiting, diarrhea and/or dehydration. The diarrhea often has a mucoid texture and/or is bloody.

If a kitten is displaying any combination of the symptoms listed above, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol. These ailments can be fatal if left untreated.

**Criteria for emergencies**

What constitutes a medical emergency in a kitten? A good rule of thumb is any situation in which you would call 911 for a person. Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

* Not breathing or labored breathing
* Symptoms of fading kitten syndrome or distemper (see “Serious Kitten Ailments” above)
* Signs of extreme dehydration: dry gums, weakness, vomiting, not urinating, skin tenting (when the skin is pulled up, it stays there)
* Abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
* Unconsciousness or unable to wake up
* Cold to the touch
* Broken bones
* Any trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on
* A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn’t stop when pressure is applied
* Loss of appetite for more than 12 hours

If a foster kitten displays any of these symptoms, please follow the emergency phone protocol. If the animal is vomiting or has diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, you can probably wait until the next day to get help. However, if the animal is lethargic and shows no interest in food or water, start the emergency phone protocol.

If you think your foster pet may incur permanent damage or pass away if not seen by a veterinarian immediately, please proceed to the approved emergency clinic and start the emergency phone chain on the way.

**Socializing and instilling good behaviors in kittens**

Your goal as a foster parent is to prepare your foster kittens for forever homes. While a big part of that is helping the kittens to grow and be healthy, another component is helping them develop the good habits that will make them wonderful companions for their adopters.

**Establishing good litter box habits**

Start introducing your kittens to the litter box around the age of four to five weeks. Make sure the litter box you are using has low sides, to make it easy for the kittens to climb in and out. Some foster parents like to use disposable litter boxes, and that’s fine. Keep kittens confined to a small area and have at least one litter box in each room that the kittens can access. You can encourage the kittens to use the bathroom facilities by gently returning them to their litter box every 15–20 minutes while they’re playing.

You also want to make sure that you are scooping the litter box at least twice a day, more if you have a large litter or they have diarrhea. You will also need to dump the litter box entirely every two to three days and clean with dish soap. A clean litter box will promote good bathroom habits for the kittens going forward. If your foster kittens are not using the litter box, please notify the foster coordinator so you can start resolving the issue before it becomes a habit.

Oftentimes, kittens miss the litter box if they have medical issues like diarrhea, or if they have too much free space, causing them to forget where the box is when they have to go. Clean all accidents with an enzymatic cleaner and don’t ever punish a kitten for having an accident.

**Discipline**

One of your goals as a foster parent is to help prepare your foster kittens for living successfully in a home. So, we ask that you help your foster kittens to develop good habits and skills through the use of positive reinforcement, which builds a bond of trust between you and your foster pets. The basic idea is to reward desirable behaviors and ignore unwanted behaviors.

You must not punish the kittens for behavior that you find undesirable because punishment is ineffective at eliminating the behavior. If a kitten is doing something undesirable, distract him or her before the behavior occurs. It is also important for every human in the foster home to stick to the rules established for your foster pets, which will help them to learn faster.

**Play time**

Play time is a very important part of kitten development. 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. Kittens also need toys to play with so that they can get physical exercise and mental stimulation. There are two types of toys that help with kitten development:

* Solo toys are things the kittens can play with when you aren’t there. These toys should be easy to clean and impossible for the kittens to consume. Examples are ping pong balls, toilet paper tubes, bottle corks and plastic shower curtain rings.
* Interactive toys are things that you use to engage the kittens in play. Examples are Da Bird (a feather dangling from a string) and other toys with yarn or string attached. Don’t leave kittens alone with these toys, since they can easily strangle or be ingested by the kittens.

During play time, it is always important to discourage kittens from biting your hands and feet. It may seem cute, but we want to avoid teaching kittens a habit that adopters may find undesirable.

**Socializing and handling**

Introducing your foster kittens to new things and new experiences will also help prepare them for living happily in forever homes. Follow these rules to positively expose your kittens to new people, environments and noises:

* New people: Introducing your foster animals to new people will help them become well-adjusted adult cats. Monitor all interactions with new people, though, to ensure that they are positive, not scary, experiences for the kittens. Have new people give gentle pets and treats to the kittens and interact with them using fun toys. If children are visiting, they must always be supervised until they are old enough to understand how to gently interact with a kitten.
* New environments: It will help the kittens’ adjustment into adopters’ homes if you can allow your kittens to experience different parts of your home. Whenever you introduce the kittens to a new space, provide lots of treats and play with interactive toys so that the kittens associate the new space with their favorite things. Keep the exploratory sessions brief so you don’t overwhelm your kittens, and return them to their living space if they do seem overwhelmed or scared.
* New noises: It is beneficial to expose kittens to a variety of normal household noises but, again, try to do it in a positive way. The key is to introduce different noises gradually. For example, start by keeping a radio on low volume and gradually increase the volume over a few days. Another example: Run the vacuum in another room at first, with your kittens at a safe distance. Then, over the course of a few days, move the vacuum noise closer to their room. If another person plays with the kittens while you make the noise, it may help alleviate any stress or fear that they may feel. Some kittens are naturally fearful, so just go even slower with the timid ones.

Another thing you can work on with your foster kittens is getting them comfortable with being in a cat carrier. When you are not using the carrier for transportation, leave the carrier (with the door removed or securely propped open) in your foster kittens’ room. Put toys, treats and a soft blanket in the carrier, to encourage the kittens to go in and spend time there.

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| **Schedule for successful socialization**  If your foster kittens are not socialized at all when you bring them home, you’ll need to have a more focused socialization plan. Remember, keep all experiences positive for the kittens.  **Days 1–7**: Your foster kittens may be hissing, swatting, spitting and/or growling.  Activities to engage in:   * “Burrito-wrapping” the kitten in a blanket or towel: Use gloves and a towel to handle the kitten if needed. * Hand-feeding: Feed the kittens dabs of baby food (protein only, with no onion or garlic on the ingredients list) or canned tuna by hand. * Picking up and returning: Repeatedly pick up each kitten and return him/her to their safe space. * Playing: Try engaging the kittens in play with interactive toys.   **Days 7–14**: The kittens may hiss when you approach, but respond to touching and petting.  Activities to engage in:   * Handling: Continue handling and petting the kittens. If improvement is shown, try to move to handling other body parts, but do not go too fast. * More playing: Start standing and walking around while playing with the kittens, to get them used to normal human movement. * More hand-feeding: Give the kittens treats while you handle them, to help them learn that you are not a threat.   **After 14 days**: Your kittens may still be shy, but should be more comfortable with you approaching them and should no longer display defensive aggression behaviors. If your kittens do not show improvement at all after two weeks of attempts at socialization, please contact the foster department for guidance. |