



ARLGP FOSTER PROGRAM RESOURCES: Socializing Feral and Under-Socialized Kittens

Feral, colony and under-socialized kittens are kittens who have not yet been socialized to the presence of humans. They will present as avoidant, fearful and possibly aggressive. Hiding, hissing, swatting and other behaviors are typical.

If we begin work early (prior to 3 to 4 months) are committed to their growth and development, and have developed a broad toolkit for working with them we can expect excellent results from our efforts. Please read the following tips and tricks thoroughly if you'd like to join our kitten socialization team!

Setup Your Home

Quiet Space

The kittens will be quite fearful and can be easily startled by loud noises and sudden movements. So initially, you'll want to make sure you have space in your home that is quiet, calm and free of lots stimulus. As they progress, you'll want to expose them to a normal household environment and different people.

Confined Space

Kittens should stay in a confined area. This gives us frequent, easy access to the kittens for when we want to interact with them. Kittens who are given enough room to run and hide are not only difficult to catch, but the trauma associated with being "chased" can delay or prevent healthy socialization.

A confined area can be an extra large wire dog crate (provided by the ARLGP) or an enclosed play pen like the one shown below. Though we don't have play pens to loan, you may be interested in purchasing your own as they have several benefits. Because they unzip from the sides and the top they are easy to access. Also, due to the fact that many are collapsible, they can be easier to move from room to room, if you'd like to keep the kitten in the room in which you are spending your time.

Crates/Pens should have a litter box, water dish, plenty of soft blankets, a few kitten safe toys, and some cozy spots to snuggle into.



Block Inaccessible Spaces

As you progress with socializing you may be able to give your kittens a bigger space to explore such as a spare bedroom or office. However, it is incredibly important to **block and/or remove any access to inaccessible hiding spaces**, such as the space under the bed and nooks behind furniture. Not only can it be dangerous for kittens to access these spaces, but it can also hinder your ability to locate and retrieve them. Episodes of hiding while a big, scary arm reaches toward them and drags them out from their hiding spot can greatly impinge your efforts at socializing them.

Do You Have Time?

Socializing kittens takes a fair amount of time and you'll want to make sure you have a schedule that allows you to interact with them **at least six times a day**. As they begin to be comfortable being held, being able to keep the kittens close to your body for large portions of the day can dramatically increase their sociability.

Bringing your Kitten(s) Home

When you bring your kitten home set their carrier directly inside the crate or pen you have set up. If possible remove the top of the carrier. Using a towel or protective gloves gently lift your kitten(s) from the carrier and place them in the crate/pen. Remove the carrier and securely close the crate/pen.

Put some wet food in a cat dish and place it inside the pen. If your kitten starts eating right away just hang out while he/she eats. If your kitten continues to hide/cower you may need to give him or her some time to recover from the transition from shelter to home.

Socializing Your Kitten(s)

Feeding Your Kittens

Use feeding time as an opportunity to create positive association with your presence. At first you may simply hang out and chat with your kitten, but eventually you should be able to handle your kitten freely while they eat.

Steps:

1. Sit next to your kitten while they eat. Chat to them in a sweet, calm voice the entire time they are eating. So long as they continue to eat you may consider moving onto the next step. (If your kitten won't eat in your presence try a higher value food, such as tuna, and increase your distance from the kitten. Slowly decrease your distance over time. If you need to take this step you'll want to also free feed some dry kitten food in order to assure your kitten is getting the proper nutrition.)
2. Begin gently touching the kitten as they eat. So long as they continue to eat you may consider moving onto the next step.
3. If gentle touch is tolerated well try slow, gentle strokes down their body and scratches in enjoyable areas like behind ears, cheeks and base of tail. So long as they continue to eat you may consider moving onto the next step.
4. Cup your hand under their chest and apply a small amount of upward pressure. Progress toward lifting your kitten off the ground slightly as long as they continue eating.
5. Once you are able to gently lift your kitten off the ground and they continue eating it's time to begin snuggling them!

At any point during this process you can try **hand-feeding** your kittens. This is a great way to associate you and your presence with something good.

Snuggling Kittens

Once you can easily handle your kitten begin devoting time to snuggling them. The more you can do the better. This may be several individual snuggle sessions throughout the day or you may be able to hold the kitten throughout the day while performing other tasks. If doing this make sure to give your kitten breaks for potty, eating, napping and relaxing in their pen.

Wrapping kittens gently in a towel or blanket can also provide some sense of security. Try using this method while snuggling each day as tolerated by the kitten.

Gently rocking kittens, much like you would with a baby, can also help. Try draping the kitten over your arm and do a short, rocking back and forth motion while you pet them.



Playing with your Kitten

Under-socialized kittens may not begin playing with you until well into the snuggling stage. In order to encourage play try using kitten safe wand toys. These are fun and engaging, but allow you to maintain some distance if your kitten is still shy when you approach.

Have Patience

Remember to have patience. You may have times when a kitten, who just spent an hour draped over your lap, hisses and hides when you walk into the room. This is to be expected. Just don't get discouraged. Keep up with your feeding, snuggling and playing sessions and you'll soon see progress!