

Socializing a Fearful Kitten

A fearful kitten is generally one who has not received enough socialization or interaction with people. If a kitten does not experience adequate contact with humans during the prime socialization window of 2 – 7 weeks, they are likely to be fearful and uncomfortable in new environments. Depending on the individual temperament of the kitten, what they have observed from their mother, and how old they are, the kitten may hiss, spit, swat, or just attempt to run away. Some fearful kittens learn to trust people quickly, while others can take longer. These kittens can make wonderful companions, provided that you are willing and able to give them lots of time and patience to warm up.



Setting a fearful kitten up for success

Set up a large dog crate in a small room – ideally a bathroom or space that is empty. This will give you easy access to the kitten and will not allow them to hide in an unsafe or hard-to-reach location, like under a bed or behind furniture. The crate should be large enough to fit a hiding box, food, water, litter box, and a few toys. The hiding box could be the carrier you brought the kitten home in, a cat den, a cardboard box, a paper bag, or simply a covered cat bed. This hiding spot will be a safe place for the kitten to avoid interaction and decompress. If you place the carrier in the crate, make sure the carrier door will stay open – you may need to place a small, weighted object in front of it so it doesn't swing shut, remove the door completely, or zip tie it open. Draping a towel/blanket over the sides of the hiding space can make it cozy and add an extra level of privacy. Even though it is recommended to start your fearful kitten in a large dog crate, it is still important to kitten-proof the room they are in to ensure that they would remain safe should they escape. You do not want them to be able to crawl under doorways, into furniture or vents, or anywhere else that may be unsafe or difficult to retrieve them.

Bringing home a fearful kitten

Kittens respond to consistent positive experiences. Spend time with the kitten several times a day, keeping sessions short and consistent. Keeping socialization sessions at the same times each day will create a routine that your kitten can predict so they can prepare and cope with stress.

Allow fearful kittens an initial adjustment period of 24-48 hours after bringing them home before you begin handling them. This will allow them to decompress and adjust to their new environment. During this period, you can refill food bowls, refresh water, and clean litter boxes – all while moving slowly and speaking softly.

Food will be key to socialization. Providing kittens with food creates an incentive for them to interact with you and they will begin to form a positive association between people and food. Make sure your kitten has access to dry food and water at all times. Each time you visit, feed small



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amounts of canned food, quietly staying in the room while the kitten eats it. If the kitten is too scared to eat it while you are present, the act of simply leaving the food in the kennel will begin to build that positive association. When you visit, blink slowly at your kitten, which indicates that you mean no harm. Spend time in the room reading a book, watching a TV show, playing games on your phone, etc. so the kitten will begin to positively associate you with the food, treats, and respectful interactions. When you are not present in room, leave a TV or radio on at a low volume to help them adjust to human voices and sounds. Be mindful that you do not want to play loud music that may scare already-fearful kittens.

Petting and handling your fearful kitten

After the short 24-48 hour decompression period, the kitten will most likely still be fearful, but you have already started building trust. Continue to offer canned food each time you come to visit them and track their progress by when and where they choose to eat it. Will they eat the food when you are not present, a couple minutes after you set it down, or immediately after you place food in crate? Over time, as the kitten's comfort level increases, gradually move the food plate closer to you while you sit in the room until the plate is in your lap and the kitten is comfortable crawling on you to get to it.

Pet and handle your kitten for the first time while they are eating, so they have an incentive to stay put. You can start petting with a paint brush or toothbrush to create extra distance between the kitten and your hand in case they start showing signs of stress and discomfort. Start petting around the face, chin, and behind the ears, and then work up to petting all over. If it is too much, stop interacting and end the session on a positive note with an extra treat. If the kitten is accepting the petting with a paint/toothbrush, slowly begin gentle petting with your hand. Continue to reward them with canned food or even chicken flavored baby food. As the kitten becomes increasingly comfortable, look for more relaxed body language which may include: ears no longer pinned back, tail moving away from the body instead of wrapped tightly to their side, and slow blinks of the eyes.

Once the kitten is comfortable being pet and climbing on you, gradually work up to holding them. If you have more than one kitten, picking up and spending time with each kitten individually will be an important step for their socialization with people. When initially picking up your fearful kitten, you will not want to just use your hands. They may hiss, swat, struggle to escape, or try to bite when picked up. Instead, use a thick towel or blanket to create a barrier between your hand and the kitten's sharp claws or teeth. WHS does **not** recommend scruffing, as it can be scary and removes the kitten's ability to make choices. Follow these steps to safely pick up the kitten:

- Gently place the blanket or towel over the kitten's body.
- Slide one end of the towel or blanket under the kitten and secure the other end so that the kitten cannot get its paws out.
- Fold the bottom of the towel up. This may be difficult if your kitten is moving and squirming. If the kitten is actively trying to bite through the towel, they are not ready to be picked up and you should instead continue to offer food and build up a positive association.



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- If you can safely pick up the kitten, roll back the blanket or towel so the kitten's head is exposed. This swaddle is called the 'burrito method' since the blanket or towel resembles a burrito, and you can expect the kitten to be tense initially.

Pet behind the ears, under the chin, or between the eyes, talk to the kitten in a soft voice, and offer canned food while they are being held. Do not release the kitten until they show a relaxation signal (softening of the eyes, eating offered food, purring when pet, etc.). Releasing the kitten when they are displaying relaxed body language will minimize the reinforcement of unwanted behaviors, such as struggling to escape, hissing, and pinning their ears back.

If your fearful kitten has relaxed and settled several times in the burrito swaddle, you can move on to the 'taco swaddle.' The taco swaddle uses the bed or blanket the kitten is already on and requires less restraint. When the kitten is on a cat bed or blanket, fold over the sides and move the kitten and bed into your lap or another location. This is for kittens who are not going to struggle out of the hold. After multiple sessions of a kitten remaining soft and accepting petting during the taco hold, you may pick them up and handle them without a towel.

Continue to read the kitten's body language. If a kitten appears tense or is showing signs of stress, it is better to use a towel or blanket rather than risk a bite or scratch that would potentially require medical treatment. After every handling session, offer a bit of canned food or even chicken flavored baby food to the kitten as a reward for accepting petting. This will continue to positively associate the petting and handling with the tasty treats.

Playing with a fearful kitten

Play is a great way to develop your bond with your kitten while providing some much-needed exercise and enrichment. Always have toys available for your kitten – these can be balls, crinkle toys, or even treat-dispensing toys. You can bring additional interactive toys for you and the kitten to play with when you are in the room, such as a tunnel or wand toy. You do not want to stick any toy in the kitten's hiding space; instead, lure them out. Jerking the wand toy around in tiny motions to mimic prey like mice or birds will typically get the kitten's attention and their eyes will follow the toy's movements. When the kitten gains more confidence, they will come out of the hiding spot and engage with the toy. After each play session, reward the kitten with a treat.

Breaking Free of the Crate

When kittens display relaxed body language, choose to approach you, and allow you to handle them without a towel, they are ready to explore the full room. This is another chance to double check for hiding spots and put away any items you would not want a kitten to get into. Prop open the crate door, so the kittens still have access to their familiar safe spot. The kitten may initially hide as the additional space, new objects, and smells can be frightening, but that is okay! They are still learning that people are safe and how to cope with change. Spend time with them in the room, offer canned food, and have a play session until they are displaying relaxed body language. In this larger space, introduce new items like cat scratchers, cat towers, and larger toys that would not fit in the crate.



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When the kitten is ready to free roam in the room, they are also ready to meet new people. The goal is to socialize kittens so they are comfortable around other people and pets, and this can be done in either a foster or adoptive home. As long as kittens are healthy and have had their first round of vaccinations, it is safe to introduce them to strangers. The kitten may hide when unfamiliar people enter the room and it should always be the kitten's choice to approach and interact. Have visitors offer canned food or a treat, or initiate a play session if this is something the kitten enjoys. You want the kitten to have as many positive experiences with new people as possible. If introducing a fearful kitten to other animals in the home, please see Cat-Cat or Cat-Dog introduction handouts.

It is important to remember that kittens are individuals; some take longer than others to display relaxed body language, and some may never feel completely comfortable with people. It is a special experience to build a relationship and bond with a fearful kitten. However, it can be a long process. If you have questions along the way, please contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexpert@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173.