



Training Playbook:

Neonatal Kitten Care

Introduction

The care of neonatal kittens can be a daunting endeavor for many organizations because of the vulnerability of kittens and the time and resources their care requires. Following a carefully planned procedure for kittens can help ease these concerns and make caring for this vulnerable population a little less overwhelming. This playbook helps you create a protocol for programming so that you can swiftly and effectively care for neonatal kittens in your community, and ultimately create more positive outcomes for kittens who formally enter your shelter.

Program Overview

Having a solid procedure for neonatal kittens is critical for saving as many kittens as possible. Even if it is not yet “kitten season” in your community, it is always an appropriate time to begin preparing your shelter and community members for meeting the needs of neonatal kittens.

The first step in creating a neonatal kitten protocol is preventing them from coming into the shelter in the first place. Community cat programming can help reduce the number of kittens being born in your community, but advising community members on [what to do](#) if they find seemingly abandoned kittens is also critical for slowing intake to your shelter. Many kittens found by concerned residents are not truly orphaned, and your shelter should encourage the finder to leave them with their mother. These are key factors to consider when determining if kittens are truly orphaned:

- **Time frame:** Oftentimes, the kittens’ mother is out searching for food or hiding from humans and will return in a matter of hours. Many shelters now encourage concerned residents to wait 10–12 hours for mom to return before deciding that the kittens are abandoned.
- **Condition of kittens:** If the kittens do not have any signs of injury or illness, or they are not cold to the touch or crying, they most likely are being cared for by their mother. The kittens and their nest should be relatively clean if they are being cared for.

If it is determined that the kittens have a mother caring for them, we recommend not bringing them into foster care if they are not in immediate danger. Mother cats are very capable of caring for their young and typically do not need much, if any, human intervention. The stress and higher risk of disease that these feline families are exposed to in the shelter and in foster care can negatively impact their health and development.

If it is determined that the kittens are truly abandoned and need rescuing, the first 24 hours are crucial to the kittens’ overall success. It is important to evaluate the kittens’ age and health status as soon as that determination is made. Because these kittens will need round-the-clock care and isolation to prevent disease, it is best that they do not enter the shelter at all, but instead go into foster care.

One straightforward way to recruit new neonatal foster caregivers is to offer to provide “kitten kits” for concerned residents who find kittens, as well as information and training on [caring for abandoned kittens](#). One great resource for neonatal kitten caregivers is the [Kitten Lady’s kitten care page](#). Many shelters model their foster care manuals after this information.

Recruiting and retaining seasoned kitten caregivers to have on call can be helpful in finding foster placement for kittens who are truly in need of care and cannot be cared for by the people who find them. The goal is to keep the kittens out of the shelter entirely, but if they must enter the shelter, to get them into a foster home the same day they arrive. If your shelter does not currently have a robust foster care program, see our [operational playbook](#) on creating one.

Once you have a robust foster care program and have recruited kitten foster volunteers, guiding them through the development of their neonatal litters is crucial for achieving positive outcomes for the kittens. By [determining kittens’ ages](#) at the time they are found and providing appropriate nutrition and enrichment for their phase of development, shelters and foster caregivers can set up orphaned kittens for success. There are some nuances with each unique litter of kittens, but these guidelines can help provide a starting point:

- **Kittens with a nursing mother:** These are typically the easiest group of kittens to foster, because the mother cat takes on the responsibility of feeding and cleaning her kittens. The foster caregiver's responsibility is to feed the mother, clean her litter box and bedding, provide socialization to the kittens and monitor the overall health of the family. If it is determined that foster care is appropriate for a nursing mother cat and her kittens, the following should be provided:
 - A room or a large crate with a nesting area
 - A litter box for the mother cat
 - Food and water for the mother cat

- **Bottle babies:** Kittens under four weeks of age will need to be bottle-fed every two to six hours, and stimulated to go to the bathroom. They will need to be kept clean and warm, and weighed daily to ensure that they are growing properly and getting enough nutrition. There are many detailed [resources](#) on feeding bottle babies, and this information is a general guideline:
 - 0-1 week (50-150 grams): 2-6 mls. every 2 hours
 - 1-2 weeks (150-250 grams): 6-10 mls. every 2-3 hours
 - 2-3 weeks (250-350 grams): 10-14 mls. every 3-4 hours
 - 3-4 weeks (350-450 grams): 14-18 mls. every 4-5 hours
 - 4-5 weeks (450-550 grams): 18-22 mls. every 5-6 hours
 - 5-8 weeks (550-850 grams): Weaning, offer ample wet food or gruel every 6 hours

- **Weaning kittens:** Kittens begin weaning at four weeks of age. These kittens will need to be fed a gruel of formula and canned kitten food, supplemented with the bottle until they are able to eat enough solid food on their own.
- **Self-feeding kittens:** Once kittens are weaned, they can use the litter box and eat on their own successfully. This group needs to be monitored to ensure that they are gaining weight properly; kittens must reach two pounds for sterilization surgery and adoption. This is a great time to write profiles and take photos to promote the kittens' adoption.

Your shelter should also determine surgical options for foster kittens once they reach the proper age and weight requirements for sterilization. Many shelters sterilize kittens once they weigh one-and-a-half pounds, which typically happens around six to seven weeks of age. Having a policy and surgery schedule available for foster caregivers when their kittens reach this milestone helps to move the kittens quickly toward adoption.

Helping your foster volunteers promote their foster kittens for adoption allows positive outcomes for kittens more swiftly and keeps kittens out of the shelter while waiting for adoption.

Program Composition

When you're creating your kitten programming, it's important to have a few key components:

- Staff dedicated to the kitten programming
- A plan for recruiting and retaining kitten foster volunteers
- Clear, consistent messaging to the community that starts with dispatch
- "Kitten kits" containing critical supplies that can go home with foster families, including:
 - Bottles and nipples
 - Syringes
 - Kitten Milk Replacer (KMR) or similar kitten formula
 - Canned kitten food for weaning
 - A heating source (like a SnuggleSafe disk or a heating pad that doesn't shut off automatically)
 - A scale for weighing kittens

- Policy and procedures for general medical and medical emergencies to guide kitten foster caregivers through the development of their neonatal kittens
- A [kitten foster care manual](#) to guide foster caregivers

Emergencies: When developing a neonatal foster program, it is important to remember that emergencies happen. That's why it's crucial to have a clear procedure for foster caregivers to follow if they experience an emergency with their foster kittens. Typically, the most common emergencies are kittens not eating or becoming too cold. While foster caregivers will naturally want to rush "fading" kittens to the closest veterinarian, the best advice is to assess the situation and follow these guidelines first:

- Keep the kittens warm, and do not feed them if they are cold. Do not rely on your own body heat to warm the kittens; use a heating pad or a SnuggleSafe disk.
- Get the kittens' blood sugar up by feeding them formula only once they are warm.

Before sending kittens to foster care, you'll want to determine what steps foster volunteers should take if a kitten's health is failing, so that they have a clear procedure to follow. Your shelter should also have a procedure to follow if a kitten unfortunately dies. It is important to remind foster caregivers that kittens are very fragile and they sometimes pass away even with all our interventions.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of kitten programming, the following documents may act as templates as you implement or scale up this program at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following only as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public).

If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your [regional strategist, regional director](#) or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

Additional Resources

- [Best Friends' Neonatal Toolkit](#)
- [Alley Cat Allies Neonatal Care Guide](#)
- [Kitten Lady's Kitten Care Guide](#)
- [Maddie's Fund Foster Kitten Guidelines](#)