

FACTSHEET

Orphan kittens - considerations

Young orphaned kittens are very fragile, and raising them can be difficult, time consuming and many times not successful. Sadly, kittens who are found abandoned by their mother often have serious health issues or abnormalities that even a vet cannot detect (including sight, hearing and neurological defects).

It is extremely rare for a mother cat to abandon a kitten unless there is something wrong with them (mother may know best).

However, there is the possibility something has happened to the mother cat (injured/sick). Regardless of the circumstances, if you find an orphan kitten there are many important things to consider BEFORE you decide to take on the responsibility of caring for them. Do you know what is involved? How prepared are you for the possibility the kitten may pass away? Can you afford veterinary attention whenever the need arises? Young orphan kittens need much more than best intentions.

Ideally a kitten should stay with their mother until they are at least 8-10 weeks old. Not only does the mother's milk provide essential nutrients and antibodies that help to ensure a kitten grows up healthy and strong, they learn important socialisation skills only a mother cat and feline siblings can teach them.

Additionally, kittens who have not received colostrum from their mother will have weakened immune systems and are much more susceptible to disease and infection. Colostrum is the first milk produced by the mother after birth. It is very high in protein and antibodies.

Importantly, when you find a kitten you should look around for the mother cat. Mother cats can leave their kittens for short periods of time while they go in search of food, so don't take a kitten away from where you've found them until you're certain the mother cat is not returning. You can tell if a mother cat is still caring for her kittens by the kitten's appearance and state of the nest area. Kittens who are healthy looking and sleeping quietly are most likely being looked after by their mother. Also, the nest area is clean and dry. Kittens who are dirty, crying incessantly and the nest area is soiled indicates they most likely have been abandoned.

In the case where a kitten is in danger of being injured (eg on/near a busy road) remove the kitten from danger and try to locate the mother cat before you take the kitten away. If the mother cat cannot be found, the next step is to take the kitten to a vet for a health-check and age assessment. In the case of very young kittens (birth - 3 weeks old) unless a surrogate mother can be found, it may be potentially kinder to have the vet put the kitten to sleep. This is a consideration you should discuss with the vet, based on the kitten's age, health status and your capacity to care for a very young kitten. To find a surrogate mother cat you will need to call around vet clinics and shelters.

A kitten raised in total isolation from other cats is at great risk of developing psychological abnormalities, including nervousness, aggression and a reduced ability to cope with strange surroundings, people or other animals.

The key development period of an orphan kitten for friendly feline contact is between 4-12 weeks old. It's advised they should have supervised contact with older kittens or cats who are fully vaccinated during this time. Also, you can call vet clinics and shelters to find other orphan kittens they could be raised with. Additionally, kittens between 3-8 weeks old need to be exposed to a variety of things to grow up to be well-adjusted friendly cats (eg lots of gentle handling by different people – old/young/male/female; exposure to household sounds – radio/tv/vacuum cleaner; toys that encourage pouncing and catching skills).

To raise an orphan kitten, total dedication and commitment is required by you at all times. You need to provide a hygienic, warm environment, a proper feeding regimen according to their age, attention to urination and defecation and attention to general health – including psychological and behavioural health. Importantly, your lifestyle must be flexible (including work and personal commitments) so the intervals between feeding times is not exceeded (eg 2 week old kittens need 2-3 hourly feeds) and all their other special needs are met.

Remember, in some cases it is not in their best interest to be hand-reared, especially when they are very young (birth – 3 weeks old) and certainly if you don't have the time and resources.