Willamette Humane Society

Mom & Kitten Packet
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BRINGING HOME A PREGNANT MOTHER

MATERNITY FOSTER HOME GUIDELINES

We hope that this experience will be as rewarding for you as it is beneficial to the health and well-being of mom and her kittens. The majority of births and newborn litters are trouble-free and require only your quiet supervision; the information here will help you prepare for any complications that can, although rarely do, arise. If you have any questions or concerns not addressed in these guidelines, please call your mentor. Keep in mind that these are only guidelines and are not meant to replace expert advice.

A cat can be in heat from 6-20 days. Pregnancy can be diagnosed by a veterinarian between 20-30 days after mating. The typical gestation period for a cat is 63 days. A cat may gain 2-3 pounds during pregnancy, depending on how many kittens she is carrying. She will require more and more food as her pregnancy progresses, and we recommend that you feed a high-quality kitten food (Authority Brand from Petsmart, Science Diet, Iams, Nutro, Royal Canin, etc.) and provide her with constant access to food before, during, and after the birth of her kittens.

PREPARING FOR THE BIRTH

It is imperative that you have a quiet, out of the way place in your home that will be warm, safe and available for the entire time you are fostering. This means that this space will only be used for Mom and her kittens for the time you have them in your care. Inaccessibility from other family pets like dogs, or your resident cats, must be strictly enforced. This is absolutely necessary for the health and safety of not only the litter, but also your resident animals as well.

New mother cats have been known to resort to abandonment or even cannibalism if they feel that other animals or people threaten the well-being of their babies. This is especially true with mothers who are not well socialized.
New kittens are very susceptible to disease and can pick up illnesses from your seemingly healthy pets. Also, the stress of pregnancy and birth can cause the mom cat to become ill from something that has been dormant in her system, so do not put your resident pets at risk by exposing them.

A kittening or nesting box must be provided for the expectant mother. This can usually be a cardboard box without a lid and a hole cut out of the side for the mom cat to enter and exit. Fill it with clean towels and let her make her own nest. After the birth, you must change these towels immediately and then on a frequent basis, as they will become soiled – so don’t use the “good” towels.

Provide a litter box, food and water. During the last week or so of pregnancy, and during the nursing weeks, dry and moist kitten food should be fed to the mom cat. Kitten food is recommended for lactating females, as it has extra calories and nutrients and will help support Mom cat during this very exhausting time in her life. Let Mom eat as much as she wants—after all, she is feeding a brood herself!

The shelter strives to feed a premium diet (Authority, Science Diet, Iams, Nutro, Etc.) to provide the best support for the mother cat, the best start for the babies, and an easier transition to the diet they will be fed when they return to the shelter.

**The Birth**

A week or less before the event, mom cat may start to move about furtively, root about in the nest and may possibly attempt to escape the room you have designated for her in hopes of finding a linen closet or soft bedspread for her delivery. Be sure to keep your eye on her to ensure she stays in her room!

About 24 hours before delivery, you may notice her belly drop to form a “pear” shape and her nipples start to swell. A small amount of discharge from the vagina is also normal. Some moms-to-be will give you clues that it is time—others will not. Some will not eat until the deliveries are finished and some will snack in between. Some will be vocal while delivering and some will be silent. Some will want you in the room, others will not. Let Mom tell you what she needs. After all, having kittens is a natural and normal experience and cats have been doing it for thousands of years!
Most feline births are routine and trouble free, so try not to disturb her during the process. Make sure she has access to food and water and replace her regular litter with shredded paper in the litter box before delivery begins. She will start mild labor, straining a few hours before the first kitten is born. If, however, she has been heavily straining, for an hour or so, without producing a kitten, or three or more hours pass between kittens, call your mentor.

Occasionally, first time moms will not quite “get it.” If this is the case and she delivers a kitten and just walks away, she might not realize that it is alive and needs her care. The membrane covering the kitten’s face must be removed immediately so it can breathe. If Mom doesn’t do this, gently tear open the sac covering its head so it can breathe. After the first kitten, Mom usually figures it out and carries on as she should. Most moms will eat the afterbirth as it contains nutrients and hormones she will need to recover from the birth. She will also bite through the umbilical cord and clean the babies.

After the delivery of the litter is finished, try to observe the family to make sure that the kittens are nursing and that Mom is not bleeding excessively from the vagina. If things are not as they should be, call your mentor. Once the event is concluded, and Mom and kittens are resting comfortably, replace the soiled towels with clean ones and let the new family rest in peace and quiet. Empty the paper out of the litter box and replace with regular kitty litter.

Some tips on constructing the nest and handling newborns: put several layers of towels in the nest prior to the birth; after the birth, you can roll the dirty upper layer off and gently move the kittens onto the clean layer underneath. Handle newborns gently, but make sure to check on them at least twice a day. Are they nursing? Hanging out with mom? Crying a lot (this could be an indication that they are cold or not getting enough milk). Make sure to count each time you check on them. Sometimes a mother cat will take a kitten out of the nest and leave it somewhere else in the room. If this happens, put the kitten back in the nest and call your mentor right away.

Be careful! Mother cats can be very protective of their young and become overly aggressive toward resident pets. This means watchful attention when entering or leaving the area you have set aside for mom and her babies.
SIGNS OF A DIFFICULT DELIVERY

Most births proceed without incident, and your role as a foster parent is to quietly monitor the birthing process. However, call your mentor immediately if any of the following happens during delivery:

- The mother cat seems to be straining or having strong contractions for a period of 1 hour without delivering a kitten.
- You observe any excessive bleeding (more than approximately two teaspoons).
- There is unusual discharge from the vulva under the tail. Normal discharge is green; abnormal can be black, cloudy, or foul-smelling.
- The mother is not cleaning the kittens after delivery. If this occurs, use a piece of sterile gauze and remove any fluid from the nose and mouth. Then dry the kitten using a clean towel and a gentle rubbing action.
- A kitten is not breathing. If this occurs, turn the kitten on its back and cradle it in your cupped hands with its head at your fingertips. Raise your arms and swing the kitten downward in an arc several times to force the liquid from the lungs. Then, rub him vigorously with a towel for several minutes all over his body to stimulate breathing.
- Occasionally the umbilical cord will not separate from the mother and kitten. If this occurs, take a thread and tie a knot ½ inch from the kitten’s belly and another knot 1” towards Mom, and then cut the cord with the scissors between the two knots. This will prevent bleeding if the cord tears. Don’t be surprised if the cord retracts back inside Mom during a contraction. The cord and placenta will be delivered in time. Never pull on the cord to try and get it out.
**Post-Natal Signs of Trouble**

If all kittens and mom seem well, your only obligation to the mom and new kittens for the first week or so is watchful supervision. Mom will need kitten kibble and water at all times. Contact your mentor immediately if you observe any of the following in the mother cat:

1. Acts lethargic, or as if she is in pain or continues to strain.
2. Ignores her kittens.
3. Continues bleeding from the vulva.
4. Has painful, hard, or swollen mammary glands

Kittens should be nursing up to 3 times an hour. The mother cat should be grooming each kitten after feeding, and licking their bottoms to stimulate elimination. Contact your mentor if you observe any of the following in the kittens:

1. Constant crying and failure to stay at the nipple.
2. Refusal to nurse.
3. Feels cold to the touch.
4. Withdrawing from the other kittens.
5. Rejected or ignored by the mother.

Mimzy and her newborn kittens

A kitten only minutes old.

**Naming Your Kittens**

- Feel free to name your kittens! Just remember to keep the names original so we don’t end up with too many cats named “Princess.” Sometimes a cat with a weird or unusual name will stick out and be adopted even faster!
- It can be helpful (but not necessary!) to have a “theme” for your litter so they can quickly be distinguished from other litters. An example would be one litter with three kittens being named “Sage,” “Thyme” and “Basil.”
- You can always do a Google search for kitten names if you need inspiration!
**Kitten Socialization**

First and foremost we ask that you treat your foster kittens with the same love and care that you give your own companion animals. Daily attention (at least 1 full hour a day per kitten) from you and other family members and friends makes them well adjusted, which makes them significantly more adoptable! This includes petting, playing, cuddling, trimming nails, grooming, feeding, etc.

**The First Few Days:**

- **Give kittens an initial two-day adjustment period before you begin holding them if they are semi-feral.**

- Set the kittens’ crate up off floor so they feel more comfortable. Cats feel safer if they are higher and not at ground level.

- Move slowly and speak softly around the kittens. Don’t wear shoes when walking around them. Don’t play loud music or make loud noises.

- Keep their crate in the part of the house where you spend the most of your time (assuming you don’t have other cats in the home).

- For young abandoned kittens, a ticking clock wrapped in a towel sounds like a mother cat’s heartbeat and can be very soothing.

- Reward positive behaviors like being curious or social, and ignore negative behaviors, and avoid disciplining other pets where the kittens can see/hear you.

- Gauge each kitten’s ability to learn and become accustomed to you. Evaluate each individually—don’t go by set rules.

- Spitting, hissing and hiding are all expressions of fear; be patient and do not mistake these signs for aggression.

- If a litter of kittens are slow to socialize, consider separating them. Isolating the kittens forces them to rely on people. If you can’t, make sure you spend quality time alone with each one. Litters can be put back together after a short adjustment period.

**Use Food to Promote Socializing:**

- Give the kittens access to dry kitten food at all times. When you feed wet food, stay in the room while the kittens eat it, so they associate you with high-value food and begin to trust you.

- If the kittens are very timid, try to first give them food on a spoon through the cage.

- Over time, gradually move the food plate closer to your body while you sit in the room, until the plate is in your lap and the kittens are comfortable clawing on you to get to it.

- Pet and handle the kittens for the first time while they are eating, so they have an incentive to stay put. Start petting around the face, chin, and behind the ears and work up to petting all over.

- Gradually work up to holding kittens, making sure to reward them with some canned cat food or chicken-flavored baby food on a spoon. Human baby food, especially chicken flavor, is a special incentive for kittens. **(Make sure the baby food has no onion—it’s toxic to cats.)**

- Don’t offer food to kittens on your finger or allow kittens to play with your hand or bite or scratch you. A bite from even a young kitten can be dangerous and it teaches the kittens that biting is acceptable behavior.
**Play with your Foster Kittens!**

- If you haven’t separated the kittens, take time to socialize each of them individually. Handling them away from the group can speed up the socialization process by making them more dependent on you.
- Devote about two hours per day for successful socialization. You can do a few long sessions or several shorter sessions.
- Get down to the kittens’ level and play with them; particularly kittens eight weeks and younger.
- Hold the kittens as much as possible. Make sure they are close to your body so they feel your body warmth and heartbeat. This is especially productive after they have eaten, so they associate you with the food and the cuddles.
- Use toys to entice kittens to play at around three to four weeks.
- After kittens are comfortable enough with you to fall asleep on your lap or purr in your presence, they can move from the initial confinement space to a larger, kitten-proof room.

**Introduce New People/Animals:**

- As long as all are healthy, you can introduce kittens to an adult socialized cat. A neutered tom will likely play and groom the kittens, which helps the socialization process.
- Introduce kittens to as many different kinds of people (kids, babies, men, women, elderly people, etc.) as you can to adjust them to strangers and unexpected circumstances.
- If there are other friendly animals in your household (dogs, etc.), you can introduce them as well, at your own digression. Remember that we do recommend that foster animals be kept separate from personal pets, and that you are personally responsible for any illness or injury to your personal pets as a result of interaction with foster animals.

**Be Careful!**

- Aggressive feral kittens can hurt you badly if you are not careful. Wear gloves or protective clothing if you feel it is needed.
- Sometimes you have to scruff kittens by the back of their neck to gain control. Use your entire hand and gently but firmly grasp the fur on back of neck without pinching, pull the cat up, and immediately support her hind legs.
- Keep all foster animals’ nails trimmed to prevent scratches.
- **Children should not handle kittens under three weeks of age.**
- **Do not allow unsupervised handling of kittens by children under the age of 10.**
How did this foster kitten learn to be so tolerant? She doesn’t mind being held in this awkward manner.

She went through kitty socialization class.

Every year, thousands of stray kittens are fostered and adopted out. The foster caretakers do their best to address the kittens’ medical health, but did you know that perhaps the most important action a caretaker can take that will help kittens find a permanent home is to actually socialize them. That is, give the kittens positive experiences around many different people, animals, unfamiliar kittens, environments, and for many handling procedures too. The resulting kitten is more likely to be outgoing and social like the average dog, and better able to deal with the regular stresses of life—such as your changes in schedule, addition of new members to the household or visitors, or the sight of cats moving in to the neighborhood.
Better coping skills means they’re much less likely to do what cats do when they get stressed—spray or potty outside the litter box. They are also better able to integrate into a family and interact in a more loving, social way.

**The Best Part of Socializing Kittens is That it’s Easy and Fun.** Way easier than socializing puppies. Here’s an example.

These kittens are at my house for the first time. The playroom is filled with fun toys, so even the shy ones eventually come out and play.
This structure was a pain to put together, but once together, watching the kittens play on it makes it well worth the work.

This kitten isn't sure what to make of this tripod. But because he’s in his sensitive period for socialization, he’s pretty curious and goes to investigate.
This kitten is rewarded for sitting with a treat.

Now this kitten is learning to walk over and then sit in order to earn a treat.
This kitten is learning to target—touch his nose to the ball. Targeting can be used to teach many tricks, such as spin, sit pretty, go into your litter box, come play with me.
We also give the kitten good experiences when they are restrained. This kitten is eating canned cat food in a syringe.

Here we’re pairing rough handling, such as tugging the tail, with food. It’s important to make sure that the kitten is happily eating and that you tug below the level that will cause the kitten to lose interest in the food.
Once you’ve handled the kitten for a few seconds, remove both the food and the touching hand so that it’s clear to the kitten that the two go together.

This kitten is learning that lying on his side and being held by the scruff is fun. This is how he may be restrained at some veterinary hospitals.
Don’t forget to have a litter box present during kitty socialization sessions!

The kids—3 and 6 years of age—practice holding the kitten and giving it food.

They also reward the kittens for sitting politely to get treats. They are using canned cat food on a spoon.
And of course they play with the kittens!

The kittens don’t mind being held even when there’s not food involved. In fact they are very relaxed and seek attention from the kids.
The kids also practice targeting with the kittens. When the kitten touches the target with her nose, the child removes the target and rewards with food.
This is the kitten they have chosen to adopt.

Note that this 3 year old was too shy to play with the kittens at first, especially in the presence of 5 unfamiliar adults (Me, Melissa the foster raiser and three assistants). But like the kittens, when she was allowed to just watch and see how much fun was going on, she relaxed and suddenly decided to participate on her own. Both she and the kittens had a positive experience and will continue to do well in this type of environment.
**Kitten Socialization Chart**

Name ___________________  Kennel # ______

Put your initials next to each activity on the day it was done. Add notes about difficulty, progress, etc. Some notes are: Loved it, scared,

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tue</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thur</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handling all over body</td>
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<tr>
<td>Handling paws, toes, &amp; nails</td>
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<td>Being held on side and back</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walking on various surfaces:  Floor, paper, carpet, plastic, mat</td>
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<td>Playing with ball &amp; feather toy</td>
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<td>Gentle tail tug while feeding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentle ear examination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lying on side, gently held by scruff of neck—while feeding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being held while eating wet food from a syringe</td>
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<td>Gentle pinching of skin</td>
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<td>Gentle mouth examination</td>
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<td>Gently poking with capped pen</td>
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<td>Walking through tunnel</td>
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<td>Investigating a paper bag or box</td>
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<td>Wiping body with towel</td>
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<td>Watching skateboard slowly roll</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stepping up onto step-stool</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stepping up onto skateboard</td>
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<td>Shaking towel</td>
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<td>Opening &amp; closing umbrella</td>
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<td>Lightly banging metal pans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wearing harness</td>
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