

# Kittens and Community Cat Programs: Considerations, Caveats, and Concerns

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# Why do kittens need special considerations?



## RULES OF THE ROAD.

Fast track all your kittens to adoptions if they are social.

Fast track all your adult cats to RTF if they are healthy.



Now for the exceptions...

# The science



1. Unlike many adults, kittens need our help.
  - a. In comparison to intact adults, kittens had a significantly higher prevalence of emaciation and severe disability or injury. ....
2. Much higher mortality rates compared to adults (50-75%.)
3. They are not yet part of the ecosystem and removing helps reduce population numbers.

**Association of neutering with health and welfare of urban free-roaming cat population in Israel, during 2012-2014**



# The ethics

1. They are incredibly adoptable
2. Pressure from the community
3. They're not (usually) owned by the community yet so re-homing them is not removing them from caregivers/owners.





In a perfect  
world...

Organizations would be able to place all kittens on a traditional adoption pathway.

They would all find a loving traditional adoptive home.



In reality...

We may not always have the resources to do that:

Financial

Space

Foster Homes

Kittens may not be social.

Kitten intake may displace other shelter cats and lead to overcrowding or euthanasia.

# Finding the balance: Special Considerations

## Health

### HEALTH

Unhealthy, unthrifty kittens under 2 pounds should not be considered for return to their original outdoor home. Any kitten to be returned should be in robust health and appropriate age/weight for sterilization.



### CAPACITY TO THRIVE

A kitten's ability to thrive in an outdoor environment increases as the kitten ages. Kittens closer to 8 weeks of age are less mobile and more dependent on the provision of food and other resources. Kittens closer to 12 weeks are more adept at identifying resources as are kittens who have the support and mentorship of adult cats. The younger the kitten, the more important are the following considerations.

- Access to an adequate food supply
  - Presence of caregiver(s) and/or available food source. A caregiver providing a consistent food source is preferable for kittens at the lower end of the age range over a less consistent source such as a restaurant dumpster.
  - Presence of other adult cats, including mother cat, if known, to teach kittens about food sources. \* Returning mother and kittens at the same time is recommended, even if that requires one or the other to be held until all can complete the surgery protocol.
- Environmental safety considerations at release location
  - Access to adequate housing/shelter from the elements
  - Threats from nearby high street or highway car traffic, especially where cats would need to cross in order to access a food source
  - Weather conditions at the time of release, such as extreme temperature or storms
  - Predator concerns in non-residential areas

# Finding the balance: Special Considerations Behavior

## BEHAVIOR

The primary window for socialization in kittens is 3 to 8 weeks, with socialization continuing through 12 weeks. Kittens that do not have positive exposure to humans during this critical period may develop into shy or fearful adults. Thus, it is important to set kittens up for lifelong success if they are to be adopted into homes. Consideration should be given to a kitten's behavior and capacity for socialization. A Fear, Anxiety, Stress Assessment score may be helpful in determining if return or foster placement/adoption is the best option for the kitten.



# Finding the balance: Special Considerations Your Capacity

## CAPACITY

If intaking community kittens will lead to overcrowding, disease outbreak, or euthanasia and if healthy kittens can be returned to home, kittens can and should follow the Return to Home pathway.

You should not lose sleep over this.

No, it is not ideal.

Few things in animal sheltering are.

Perfect is the enemy of good.



- Ethical decisions should be based on the capacity of the shelter to provide differing outcomes **at that moment in time.**
- An organization in the midst of growing both a community cat program and a foster network may need to make decisions on which kittens to place in a socialization program/foster home and which kittens can be returned to their original outdoor home.
- Developing a robust community cat program, including staff and volunteer resources along with an engaged community, should allow for additional consideration for the factors affecting successful outcomes for kittens and adult cats

# You have options

Finder to Foster

Safe at Home:

- 50% of people approached agreed to foster kittens
- Give community member information and supplies to set them up for success
- If shelter, rescue partner can, take them back and put up for adoption or allow person to adopt once sterilized.

Goal should always be to intake without a shelter stay

# A practical guide



1. Do we have space for this kitten, preferably in a foster home?
2. Do we have the medical and financial resources to care for this kitten, for perhaps several weeks?
3. Is the kitten social or can she be socialized through reasonable and humane methods?
4. Can we get this kitten adopted quickly?
5. Is the kitten suitable for return to home (of appropriate age and health, location is reasonable for return?)
6. Who will this kitten displace in the shelter, if anyone?



# Special Consideration: Rabies Vaccines

## Kitten Rabies Vaccine Guide

Our recommendation is that any cat, regardless of age or weight, who is to be sterilized, eartipped, and returned outdoors should be administered an initial rabies vaccine.

- There are no rabies vaccines labeled for use in kittens under 12 weeks or 3 months of age.
- While initially licensed by the USDA and labeled by the manufacturer for use in kittens beginning at 8 weeks of age, Purevax Rabies vaccine is now labeled for vaccination of kittens 12 weeks and older.
- Regardless, we encourage veterinarians to vaccinate all cats and kittens against rabies because of the possible protective effect of vaccination, even if this results in extra-label use.
- This recommendation is in line with the widely accepted practice of vaccinating species for which licensed vaccines are not available in an effort to protect people who come in contact with those animals. (Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control, 2016)
- The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians states that additional research is needed regarding “the earliest age at which rabies vaccination is effective, (and the) protective effect of maternal antibody.” (Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control, 2016)
- In order for a veterinarian to issue a rabies certificate, the rabies vaccine must be given according to the product label.
- Kittens under 12 weeks or 3 or 4 months of age (depending on the vaccine) are not eligible for a rabies certificate. Regardless, medical records should be maintained that document the administration of the vaccination.
- For community cat populations, the rabies certificate is not of primary concern, rather, the important thing is to attempt to protect the individual animal, and in so doing, protect human populations by making sure every cat that is outdoors is vaccinated against rabies.
- Each state or jurisdiction has its own rabies control program. It is imperative that veterinarians investigate, understand, and follow the legal requirements for rabies vaccination in the areas in which they practice.
- Whether or not to administer a rabies vaccine is the practice of veterinary medicine, and as such, is entirely at the discretion of the veterinarian.

# Questions?

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