

health handbook

Hand-Raising Orphan Kittens

How to keep motherless kittens alive and well.

by **DUSTY RAINBOLT**

In a Nutshell

Taking care of orphaned kittens is not as difficult as it may seem.

Your first priority is to keep the kittens warm.

Kittens need help eliminating after they have eaten. It's a vital part of your job.

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Cats magazine

When gazing at a helpless wad of fur, we can understand Prissy's dilemma in *Gone With the Wind*. We don't "know nothin' 'bout" nursing feline babies, either. They may have been left motherless for countless reasons. The queen may have been hit by a car or trapped somewhere. Or she may simply be unable to nurse them due to a caesarian section or an illness.

But don't despair. You're perfectly able to take care of these poor little kittens. Your first priority is to keep the kittens warm, says Carie Johnston, DVM, who has 16 years of experience in bottle-feeding kitten orphans. She stresses that because kittens cannot shiver for their first seven to 10 days of life, warmth is a kitten's most immediate need, more critical even than food.

You can make a warm nursery by placing a box halfway on a heating pad. Cover the nesting area with a towel or a light blanket. This should maintain the kittens' body temperatures at 101° F to 102° F without getting them too hot. If you put the pad inside the box, make sure the kittens cannot crawl under the towel or come in direct contact with the pad. The box should be large enough for the kittens to crawl off the pad if they become too warm. Monitor the heat closely. If possible, use a heating pad designed for animals, as pads for humans can get dangerously hot.

Don't let your other pets visit the kittens. While these little cuties may look harmless, they could expose your own cats to a host of contagious diseases. Also, since the kittens aren't getting mom's antibodies from her milk, they are vulnerable to diseases that your pets may be carrying.

Many orphans are crawling with fleas; the safest way to remove them is with a flea comb. When you are done handling the kittens, always wash your hands. Now it's dinnertime. Don't grab a bottle of whole milk. That's a prescription for diarrhea. Buy a special kitten formula and nurser at a veterinary clinic or pet supply store. Kitten formula comes in a ready-to-use liquid or a powder. The liquids are much easier to use, but if you are feeding an entire litter over a five-week period, they can be expensive. Powdered formulas are a much better value and have a longer shelf life.

Have your veterinarian check the kittens for dehydration and evaluate their overall condition. While you're there, ask her to show you how to feed your little charges. If they are too weak, the vet may have to place a special feeding tube directly into their stomachs. Don't try this yourself unless your veterinarian has instructed you clearly in how to do it. Improperly done, the tube could slide down the trachea and send the formula straight into the lungs, drowning the kitten.

The hardest part of bottle-feeding is punching a hole in the bottle's nipple. If the hole is too large, the formula can flow too fast, choking the kittens. But if it's too small, they won't be able to drink it. Once you've made the hole, test it yourself. When you're satisfied with the flow rate, you can feed the babies.

Rest a kitten on his stomach (never his back), and insert the nipple into his mouth. Slowly pull up and forward on the bottle so that he will nurse with his head extended and slightly elevated. Watch the level of the formula: if the level remains constant, either the nipple is blocked or the hole is too small. Make sure that the neck of the bottle remains filled with milk so the kitten isn't sucking air. Formula spewing out of the kitten's nose means the hole is too big. If this happens, hold the kitten upside down until he stops coughing.

Most kittens have an automatic cut-off valve, and the nipple will usually pop right out of their mouth when they are full. However, as a guide, feed each kitten two tablespoons of formula daily for every four ounces of weight. Very small kittens should eat every four hours. Like human babies, they will let you know when they are hungry.

After he's done, place the kitten against your shoulder, and, like a human baby, gently pat him until he burps. But your motherly duties are not quite finished yet.

Charlene Denney, the founder of the Hunt County Humane Society in Greenville, Texas, says her biggest concern is making sure foster mothers know how to help the kitten eliminate. "Unless you pee and poo them, you're going to lose them," she warns.

Denney, who has bottle-fed kittens for 20 years, says that until kittens are about three weeks old, they cannot make their bowels and bladder function on their own. She likes to use a warm, damp washcloth because its soft, but rough like the mother's tongue. Other foster moms may use moistened cotton balls. Gently stroke the genital area in circles, mimicking the mother's tongue.

"You just want to stimulate them, not hurt them," she said. "Do this after you feed them and when they get cranky."

Don't panic if a kitten fails to have a bowel movement. Each kitten is different and some do not go every day. (After four days, if the kitten still fails to pass a stool, contact your veterinarian.) Diarrhea is a more common and serious problem. At the first sign of the runs, dilute the formula just a little. If there is no improvement by the next day, see your veterinarian immediately. Kittens dehydrate very quickly.

"Weight loss indicates a loss of body fluid," says Johnston. Therefore, the kittens' weight should be monitored daily. "Check the skin tenting to test for dehydration. Pull the skin up. It should go back down pretty quick. If it doesn't, he probably needs fluids."

A warm, slightly damp washcloth gives a comforting bath to the kittens. Imitate the mother's natural motions with soft, short strokes. Do this each time you stimulate them to eliminate. Otherwise the kittens could suffer from urine scalds, which are ammonia burns from leftover urine on the kittens' behinds. And don't let the kittens get cold as you wash them.

Sometime after three weeks, the kittens will become interested in solid food. Commercial weaning powders are available, but you can also make a mush of dry kitten food by soaking it in boiling water and then adding formula. When it has cooled, put a little on your finger and offer it to the kittens. Place the rest in a shallow bowl and let them walk through it. Although messy, it's part of the learning process. Don't forget to provide fresh water for them to drink.

Around the same time, you may find a little stool in the box. Congratulations! They can use the box on their own. God designed kittens well; they come pre-programmed with potty instructions.

"Keep them in a small area," Denney says. "Even babies have an instinct not to pee and poo where they sleep. I put them in the litter pan after they eat."

Make certain they don't try to eat the litter, and use only non-clumping litter. They will dig and play and try to get out, but eventually they will use the litter box just like mature cats do.

Sometime between six and eight weeks, you will need to find them good homes. Ask potential adopters for some history. Ask what happened to their last pet and the name of their veterinarian. Also make sure they plan to get the kitten spayed or neutered. Are they are willing to keep him for 18 years? Will they still want him if he scratches the furniture? If their kid becomes allergic, will they be willing to vacuum more and to bathe the cat? If he develops litter box problems, will they try to work through them and get him back on the road to acceptable hygiene? If they can't answer "yes" to these questions, find him another home.

Draw up a contract. Ask for a nominal adoption fee to ensure that the person does not plan to sell a free kitten to a laboratory, feed it to a boa constrictor or use it for other like purposes. Ask to see identification and get a phone number. Legitimate adopters shouldn't mind your caution.

When the time comes, kiss your babies goodbye and send them off to a wonderful new life that they wouldn't have had without you. And don't worry . . . now that you know how to do it, there will always be another motherless kitten who needs your tender loving care.

Dusty Rainbolt, who recently won the Purina Cat Chow Nutrition Award, has been involved in cat rescue since 1986 and cared for her first bottle-baby in 1990.

As Published in [Cats](#) Magazine, March 2001