



## Snuggle Squad 2021

Manual for Kitten Foster Volunteers



**San Jose Animal Care Center**  
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For questions about the foster program or your kitten contact the SJACC foster staff:  
[sjkitten@sanjoseca.gov](mailto:sjkitten@sanjoseca.gov) or (408) 398-7859

**In the event of an emergency, call 408-643-4405 (M-F) or 408-464-1312 (Sat, Sun)**



A digital copy of this manual is available at [www.kittensfirst.org](http://www.kittensfirst.org)

Instructional videos are on the Kittens First YouTube channel here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzCh487fHJ4LIL7JuGOIBaw>

## Welcome to the Snuggle Squad!

The Snuggle Squad is a behavioral foster program which treats kittens that are undersocialized, fearful, and/or hissy/spitty.

### ***Learning objectives***

After reading this manual and reviewing videos online, volunteers should know:

- Why some kittens need additional socialization and common challenges of socialization
- How to house fearful kittens
- How to safely handle and pick up fearful kittens
- How to desensitize a fearful kitten
- What to do if they get bitten
- Expected timeline for improvement

## What is socialization and why can it be challenging?

From [www.kittenlady.org](http://www.kittenlady.org): “Feral kittens are kittens who have not yet been socialized to humans. Their behavior might seem avoidant, scared, or even aggressive -- but with enough patience and the right kind of care, they can often come around and become loving companions...”

Feral kitten socialization is most successful for kittens under three months of age. After 3-4 months, the kitten will have a much harder time acclimating to humans. [Trap-neuter-return] is an appropriate option for older kittens who are not socialized to humans.”

From [www.AlleyCat.org](http://www.AlleyCat.org): “Alley Cat Allies does not, in general, recommend trying to socialize a feral cat over 4 months of age...”

But keep in mind that socializing is time-consuming, especially for older kittens. It involves interacting with the kittens one-on-one for at least a couple of hours every day, and results are not guaranteed. It is important to do an honest assessment of the kitten’s progress during this time. If she does not show increasing signs of socialization within a week or so, it is best that she is returned to her colony outdoors through [Trap-Neuter-Return \(TNR\)](#). To do otherwise is to expose the kitten to ongoing stress. Kittens will be safe and healthy in their outdoor homes with their feline families.”

At SJACC we distinguish between “truly feral” kittens and cats which require lots of behavior modification in order to become pets, and kittens which are fearful and just need some basic socialization. We aim to send only the latter group of kittens into foster. Kittens which do not respond to socialization in foster homes are sent out to rescue groups that can do more extensive behavior modification and training or the kittens are spayed/neutered and returned to their original location through the shelter’s TNR/return to field (RTF) program.

## How to house fearful kittens

- Keep under-socialized kittens in a crate or playpen so they cannot hide under furniture or get stuck. Ideally, don't allow them to free-roam in a bathroom.
  - They can free roam in a room of your home only after (1) the 14-day quarantine period, (2) the room has been thoroughly kitten-proofed, and (3) they have made significant progress in socialization -- see section on play time
- Keep them in a quiet location at first, then move the crate to a more lively part of the house and/or start introducing them to more noises, such as the TV -- see section on desensitization
- Give kittens a hide-box such as a cardboard box open on one side so they can feel safe but don't give them a complete den, such as an igloo, because then they'll never come out

From alleycat.org: "First things first, set up the crate they'll be staying in and make sure it's off of the floor – cats feel safer if they're higher up where they can see their surroundings. After you bring the kittens inside and get them set up in their crate, give them an initial two-day adjustment period before trying to socialize them too much—the change of scenery can be stressful! When you do start to spend time with them, begin by moving slowly and speaking softly, and try to keep loud TV or music down. For very young kittens, a soothing technique is to wrap a ticking clock in a towel—it reminds them of their momma's heartbeat.

After they've been with you for a few days, try leaving a TV or radio on so they can get used to people's voices and sounds. If there aren't other pets around, you can leave the crate in a busy part of your home, like the living room, so they can begin to see and hear other areas of the home.

If a litter of kittens are slow to socialize, you might want to separate the kittens into individual crates or spaces so that they can rely on people more. Or you can make sure to spend some quality time alone with each one. When they feel more comfortable with you, they can be reunited with their brothers and sisters...

If kittens are in your bathroom, pull the shower curtain up and out of the way, so they can't scale it like the little monkeys they can be, and take all the knick-knacks and cleaning products out of the room. And don't keep kittens in a room with a reclining chair. The kittens can be injured or killed if they go inside the chair and accidentally get closed underneath. Double check windows and vents to make sure they are securely fastened – kittens can be little escape artists!"

## How to safely handle and pick up fearful kittens

The types of fearful kittens we send home should be able to be picked up without gloves or a towel, so long as you move slowly. Protective equipment, such as gloves or a towel, are optional based on the kitten's behavior and your comfort level.

### ***How to approach and pet a fearful kitten***

Use this strategy to visit your kitten throughout the day and prior to picking them up or moving them:

1. Talk quietly to the kitten to alert them of your arrival
2. Move slowly, quietly and deliberately with no sudden movements
3. If necessary, gently "herd" the kitten into a space where they cannot escape or run away, such as in their hide box, carrier, or a corner of the play pen. If you put pressure on the kitten by approaching or reaching out, they will likely move away. Put them in a position where they cannot easily escape.
  - a. Do NOT chase around a kitten to try and catch it. If you are chasing a kitten then you need to stop and reassess your strategy.
4. Get comfy and down at the kitten's level
5. Slowly reach out your hand and place it on the back of the kitten's head
  - a. This can be a scary part, since it may look like the kitten will scratch or bite when you get too close!
    - i. If you get bit or scratched, see section on biting/scratching
    - ii. If your kitten just hisses or looks upset, that's great, keep touching!
6. Pet the kitten's head, neck, and shoulders firmly and confidently\*
  - a. Watch their reaction -- is their fear melting away or are they still tense?
7. Once your kitten is more relaxed with the petting you can choose to
  - a. Give them a treat
  - b. Praise them
  - c. Try petting under their chin or further down their back/hind end\*
  - d. Pick them up

\* Strangely, many fearful kittens respond well to what may be seen as "rough" or "excessive petting". Once you get your hand on them they are fine with being touched and may purr, make biscuits, and/or lift up their tail/butt and lean into the pets. That being said, some kittens will respond better to slow, gentle petting -- pet your kitten in the way that they prefer!

### ***Towels and "purritos"***

Once you've approached your kitten and you have control of them with your hand you can introduce a towel. Towels are a great tool for making a kitten feel safe and protected. Similar to how we swaddle human babies, you can swaddle a kitten to make it easier to carry and hold them. Many kittens become immobilized once swaddled and can be held for long periods so long as they are inside their protective towel. This technique is often called making a burrito or "purrito".

One way to make a burrito:

1. Place towel on a flat surface
2. Place the kitten approximately in the middle and perpendicular to the long side of the towel
  - a. Make sure the kitten is in a comfortable position, because however they are lying is how they will have to stay for the duration of the wrap
3. Using your non-dominant hand, push and hold the kitten in position while you wrap
4. Using your dominant hand, wrap one edge of the towel around the front legs and side of the cat, draping it over the hand which is restraining the cat
5. Apply pressure to the kitten using your dominant hand while you free your other hand from under the towel
6. Reapply pressure to the kitten with your non-dominant hand (now on TOP of the towel)
7. Grab the other edge of the towel and wrap it around the other side of the kitten
8. Fold the bottom of the towel under as you hold it

At the end you should have only the kitten's head and maybe a tiny bit of one paw sticking out. The burrito should be tight enough that the kitten cannot escape, but not so tight as to be uncomfortable or choke the kitten. *See Youtube for instructional videos on how to burrito a kitten.*

If your kitten is trying to escape, cannot be picked up easily, or if you just need temporary restraint, you can loosely wrap them in a hand-towel to pick them up:

1. Pet the kitten with one hand and apply gentle pressure to their body so they are less likely to run
2. With the other hand, slowly move the towel along the floor or wall, keeping it low and out of sight of the kitten as much as possible
  - a. If you throw a towel straight at the kitten's face they will freak out like they are being eaten by a giant octopus
3. Slowly drape the towel over the kitten's shoulders and legs so that the long side of the towel is perpendicular to the kitten's body (so you have room to wrap their legs)

At this point you have achieved not such much of a "burrito" as a "soft taco". The kitten could easily escape or wiggle out if they wanted, but you have more control over them and can transfer them into a full burrito if necessary. For many kittens, you can simply tighten up your wrap at this point and continue socialization.

### ***How to pick up fearful kittens***

You can pick up your kitten by either using the soft taco technique described above, or picking them up like a regular kitten: supporting their hind end and holding them close to your body. If your kitten is trying to escape or jump out of your hands/arms then you need to use a soft taco wrap until they are more comfortable with being held normally.

## **Scruffing**

From alleycat.org: “Sometimes you have to scruff kittens by the back of their neck to gain control. To do it safely, use your entire hand and gently but firmly grasp the fur on the back of the neck without pinching, pull the cat up, and immediately support her hind legs.”

The practice of “scruffing”, or grabbing the kitten by the back of the neck, can be very effective at immobilizing them. However, this should not be used as your go-to or primary restraint technique. The soft taco technique described above can be used in most cases where temporary restraint is required. Many of us were taught to scruff and have scruffed kittens for many years. **However, scruffing is now no longer considered standard practice and SJACCs does not condone scruffing for routine restraint of cats.** We know it’s hard to unlearn old habits, but don’t you love staying hip and modern? Think of this as an opportunity to stretch your brain and learn some new skills!

If you *must* scruff a kitten then be sure to support their legs immediately and don’t dangle them by their skin -- ouch! It may be fine for tiny babies, but bigger kittens have way more weight than a 300 gram kitten! If you find yourself scruffing your kitten, stop and think. How did this situation arise? Is there a way you can prevent it from happening in the future? If you are needing to routinely scruff then something is off and you should speak to staff or more experienced volunteers for help in learning alternatives to scruffing.

## **Desensitization**

Desensitization means to get a kitten used to something, such as human interaction, new places, and noises. Desensitization happens to all people and animals as they are exposed to something over and over again.

However, people and animals react differently to these experiences. One pet might see a fun squeaky toy and their brain thinks it is a fun play item, while another pet might hear that squeak and think: DANGER! For some pets (and people), their default reaction to anything new might be fear and avoidance.

This is the case with many of our undersocialized kittens. Even though they’ve never been held, pet, groomed, watched Netflix, or heard a vacuum, their default reaction is to run and hide. This is due to their genetic and early life experiences. Running and hiding has kept them alive thus far, why do anything else? It’s your job to rewire your kitten’s brain to think the opposite. Instead of every new experience being an opportunity to be hurt or scared, every new experience should be safe and an opportunity for treats, cuddles, and pets (all the good things!)

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to desensitize your kittens to, in order:

1. Being around people and being pet
2. Being held
3. Being played with and out of cage time
4. Common noises, including TV, dishwasher, vacuum, laundry, people talking, and music

5. New people or animals
6. New places

To desensitize your kitten to each of these things, you will need to create a positive association with each of these events using food, positive touch (petting), and/or play. Every kitten has different preferences for what kind of reward works best for them.

### ***Step 1. Being around people and being pet***

From kittenlady.org: “Offer desirable, stinky foods like tuna. While eating, gently begin to attempt to touch the kitten -- first with a tool to keep your hands safe. Once you are confident the kitten will not bite, you can start trying to pet with your hands. Over the course of several days you should start to see improvements in the kitten's tolerance of human touch -- especially if they begin to associate it with those food rewards.

Work at the kitten's pace, but slowly challenge them to be around humans more and more. You don't want to absolutely terrify them, but you do want them to make progress. Slowly increase the frequency with which they are being touched, played with, pet.”

Visit with your kitten for short visits (1-5 minutes) at least 5 times a day. Try setting an alarm every hour to remind yourself to go and socialize your kitten. At first you'll just be hanging out, talking to them while they eat a snack, petting them, and giving treats. Once they seem more confident around you, eating treats, and/or enjoying being pet, you can try to pick them up.

### ***Step 2. Being held***

Use a towel to wrap your kitten while holding them close to your body. Carry the kitten around in the burrito and slowly allow them to see the rest of the house. You can hold them on your lap while you work on the computer or watch TV. At first, keep sessions short, 5-10 minutes, and then gradually make them longer as your kitten gets used to being out and about.

They may enjoy being fed a yummy treat while in the burrito, such as a Churru or wet food, or may be completely immobilized and unable to eat. Many kittens enjoy being pet on their head while in the burrito. Don't just ignore them when in burrito-mode, talk and interact with your kitten throughout the process.

As your kitten becomes more comfortable with hanging out with you outside their playpen, try holding them the traditional way without a towel. You may pick them up out of their playpen for just a second, then put them back. Try to get them used to what a normal adopter would do to hold them.

### ***Step 3. Being played with and out of cage time***

As your kitten becomes used to you and your home, you can create a space in your home that is kitten proof. Shy kittens will hide if given the chance, so pick a space where they can't wiggle in and get stuck under the bed, fridge, in the recliner, etc. A spare bedroom with minimal furniture

or a corner of the living room may be best. If no room can be kitten-proofed, you can create a zone by using a dog exercise pen to create temporary walls or play in a bathroom.

As much as possible, encourage kittens to play WITH you, rather than leaving toys in the kennel.

- Play with your kitten using interactive toys such as wands or rods with toys attached
  - Never leave your kittens unsupervised with feather or string toys, since they can eat them
- Never use your hands as toys or encourage roughhousing/biting of hands
- Plastic balls, rattles, and other kitten toys can be fun for your kitten to bat around
  - Ideally, purchase disposable toys or ones which can be disinfected (hard plastic, metal)

Go slow and try not to scare them with too many toys/movements. It'll take awhile for them to get used to playing with a "big kitten".

### **Step 4. Noises**

After your kitten passes quarantine, your kitten's cage should be moved to a more busy part of the house where they can be exposed to everyday noises and activities. During quarantine, you may bring their cage out for just a few hours at a time during a "quiet time", then return them to their normal room. Be sure to disinfect the space where the cage was placed. When kittens are out in a living space, be sure to minimize sudden loud noises or movement, until they are more accustomed to being out and exposed.

If your kittens are hiding, ears down, tail curled around them, eyes dilated, then they are afraid. They should come out of scared mode with some time and petting. If they don't come out, then they need to go back to their safe/quiet room to chill out before trying again. Try carrying them in a burrito wrap into the scary room and exposing them to the sounds.

If your kittens seem fine, are looking around, sniffing, and taking in their new surroundings, that's great--they are ready to be exposed to more things!

Common noises kittens need to know (loosely listed from easy to hard):

1. Talking, singing, music
2. TV
3. Neighbor's noises, construction, sounds of commerce outside
4. Dishwasher, washing machine, dryer
5. Vacuum

Introduce one noise at a time at a very low level, e.g., talking quietly, and see how your kitten reacts. If they seem okay then give them treats, play with them, pet them, etc. so they create a positive association with the noise. Next, increase the intensity of the noise, e.g., turn the music up, and repeat. If the kitten becomes afraid at this level, turn it back down to where they were unafraid. Rinse and repeat. Your goal is to gradually increase the noise level so they do not react and are exposed to fun and tasty things. Eventually, they should learn to ignore or tolerate that

noise. Ideally, they will come running to their person at the sound of fireworks--hoping for a treat! ;)

For machines, like dishwashers and vacuums, make sure the kittens are in another room with the door closed when running these machines. Give them a tasty snack and try to keep the machine as quiet as possible. Part way through, check to see if they are doing OK, give pets and treats. If the kittens seem to be doing okay, you can make the machine louder, open the door, or use the machine closer to the kittens. Use the same process as described above for increasing loudness and vibration without making the kittens react. The worst thing you can do is run a vacuum next to a scared kitten and have them be terrified and hide the whole time!

You can find YouTube videos of many common noises, such as vacuums, that you can play quietly or loudly. This is a great way to acclimate your kitten to noises before using the actual machine (which causes vibrations and they can see it, thus is scarier).

#### ***Step 4. People and animals***

If possible, get your kitten used to other people using the same petting, holding, treat-giving, and play techniques described above. They need to learn that all humans are safe and trustworthy, not just you. Allow your kitten to meet a wide variety of people of different ages, sexes, ethnic backgrounds, etc.

#### ***Step 5. Places***

This last one is the cherry on top. If at all possible, desensitize your kitten to going into the carrier by putting them in the carrier and feeding them. Close the lid if they are comfortable. Take them out when the meal is done and before long they'll learn that the carrier is a source of yummy snacks and isn't scary at all.

Once your kitten is used to being put in the carrier, you can begin carrying it around the house, again, getting them used to future travel in the car. If your kittens are rock stars, give them treats in the car and take them for short drives around the neighborhood.

Expose your kitten to the outdoors by holding them near a window or taking them on a fenced patio. Always have a harness on a kitten and hold them when taking them near the outdoors. The ground can contain harmful diseases and the outdoors are unpredictable (read: loud noises!)

### **Bites and scratches**

If your kitten's nails are too long then they may scratch you on accident while being held or while climbing on you. This is normal and not a sign of aggression. In this case, trim your kitten's nails to prevent further accidental scratches.

If your kitten strikes with their paw and actively scratches you then that is a sign of self-defense or aggression. In most cases the kitten is feeling scared and trying to protect themselves. If your

kitten is lashing out with their paws, use a protective towel over your hand when trying to approach and pick them up. Many kittens will grow out of this behavior and be perfectly social cats.

If your kitten bites you, then this is much more serious. Kitten biting is also usually due to fear aggression or can be inappropriate play. If you are bitten and the bite breaks skin, you must call the emergency number 408-643-4405. If no response, email [monique.rodriquez@sanjoseca.gov](mailto:monique.rodriquez@sanjoseca.gov) and cc [SJKitten@sanjoseca.gov](mailto:SJKitten@sanjoseca.gov) so a report can be filed. All kittens that bite people are monitored for 14 days, which can be done at home.

Wash any cuts or scratches that you have with soap and water immediately. Dress the wound with antibiotic ointment and a bandage. Follow up with your doctor if you have any concerns about injuries caused by a kitten.

## **Expected timeline for improvement**

We expect to see significant improvement in the kitten's behavior within 1 week. By two weeks the kitten should be "like a different kitten". If you are not seeing a major change in your kitten, this means that either the intensity of socialization and desensitization has been too low, and you need to spend more time with your babies, OR your kittens are too old and would be best suited as outdoor cats.

At your 2-week wellness exam, staff will assess how kittens are doing in their socialization progress. If we're concerned that kittens aren't responding to treatment, then staff may elect to keep your kittens, spay/neuter them, and return them to the field. This is because we would hate to have them be socialized in your home for 4+ weeks and lose the memory of their original colony home. In the meantime, other kittens will take their place in the colony and make re-introduction harder. It's always best to return a community kitten back to their colony sooner rather than later!