

Amarillo Rescue Coalition

Kitten Foster Manual

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Section 1: Introduction

Thank you so much for your interest in fostering kittens for Amarillo Rescue Coalition. By opening up your home to foster pets, you're not only helping to save lives, you're providing the individual attention and care these kittens desperately need.

Kittens are some of the most at-risk pets in shelters because they require intensive around-the-clock care, and many shelters don't have the resources or staff to provide that level of care. That's why the focus of our kitten foster program is to rescue kittens up to eight weeks of age from the shelter here in Amarillo. Not only does fostering help kittens find forever families, it saves their lives and greatly decreases the number of cats and kittens who are killed in Texas shelters each year.

Once you have completed your foster application online, our foster coordinator will get in touch with you to schedule a home visit and get you into our Facebook group so you can see the pets in need that we plan to pull into our program.

Foster homes are asked to provide care for the kittens and provide transportation to and from veterinary appointments as needed. We can assist with transportation needs if requested, if you didn't note it on your application, just contact us and we can list it as a need for you. Once the kittens are old enough and weigh enough to be spayed or neutered (typically two pounds), you'll bring them to the Best Friends Lifesaving Center to be fixed and then look for homes. Care for foster kittens includes a strict feeding schedule, cleaning, and lots of snuggling and play time.

Although fostering kittens is a lot of work, it is a very rewarding experience. By participating in this program, you are saving lives and helping kittens find families. Through fostering, we can work together to make a difference for the Amarillo animals.

Frequently asked questions

What do foster families need to provide?

Foster families need to provide:

- A healthy and safe environment for their foster kittens
- Transportation to and from vet appointments if possible
- Socialization and cuddle time to help teach the kittens about positive family and pet relationships

How much time do I need to spend with the kittens?

As much time as you can. The more time you spend with your foster kittens, the more socialized they will be to people. The amount of time required for feeding will vary depending on the age of the kittens you are fostering. Very young kittens need to be bottle-fed every two to three hours, while older ones may be eating on their own and needing to be fed just a couple times a day.

Can I foster kittens even if I have a full-time job?

Yes. The foster coordinator will match you with kittens appropriate for your schedule. We will need you to be available, however, to take the kittens to a vet appointment if they are sick.

How many kittens will I be fostering?

We like to have at least two kittens in a foster home so they can socialize with and learn from each other. Sometimes there are special circumstances in which a kitten goes to a foster home alone, but it's usually for a medical or behavioral reason. The decision is made by the foster coordinator.

How long will the kittens need to be in foster care?

Once a kitten weighs two pounds, he/she can be spayed or neutered and then put up for adoption. If you are fostering a litter of kittens, we will try to keep at least two of the kittens together for the surgery, but we want to get everyone spayed or neutered and ready for adoption as early as possible.

Ideally, foster cats stay in their assigned foster homes until they get adopted. We do not have a brick and mortar location in Amarillo to house animals, so these cats rely on foster homes as their home between homes.

How does my foster cat meet potential adopters?

Once a foster kitten has been cleared medically for adoption, we ask that foster families send us current personality details they have learned about the kitten. We will post the animal on social media outlets as well as on our website to start the search for their new, permanent home. If a potential adopter wants to meet your foster kitten, we will then schedule a time that fits your schedule for a meet and greet preferably in your home where they are most comfortable. If sparks fly, and it seems to be a perfect match, we will send the kitten on a trial adoption. Trial adoptions are 7 days long, and we will keep your home vacant from new fosters (unless you have a litter) until the trial adoption is complete in case something doesn't work out. Some families and kittens just don't click, and that's ok! We will pair the kitten back with you until the best suited home comes along.

Will I need to give medicine to the foster kittens?

While we do our best to ensure that we are sending out healthy kittens to foster care, most illnesses have incubation periods, meaning that if the kittens picked up something at the shelter, symptoms can arise after you take them home. So, some kittens do not require any medicine, while others do. If your foster kittens need medication, we can show you how to administer it before you take the animals home.

Can I let my foster kittens play with my personal pets?

Kittens are very susceptible to illness and can carry or catch dangerous ailments easily. For this reason, we require that foster parents isolate foster kittens with their own supplies for at least two weeks to try and ensure that the kittens are healthy prior to exposing them to your personal pets. We also advise that you consult with your veterinarian before fostering to ensure that all of your personal pets are healthy and

up-to-date on all vaccines. If, for any reason, your personal pet becomes ill while you are fostering an ARC pet, we cannot provide medical care for your personal pet.

Never leave your personal pets unsupervised around the foster kittens.

Important note: If your personal cat is allowed outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster kittens. Kittens are very vulnerable to illness and we want to limit their risk by not exposing them to anything from the outdoors.

Will any of my foster kittens die?

Sadly, kittens are fragile, so it is always possible for them to become ill and pass away while in a foster home. This may be the hardest thing about fostering kittens. If it's something you don't want to encounter, then fostering kittens may not be the best fit for you. But please keep in mind that without foster homes, most of these kittens would not stand a chance of survival in a shelter. You're helping to save lives.

Who will take care of my foster kittens if I need to go out of town?

If you have travel plans while you are fostering a cat for ARC, you will need to contact the foster coordinator to find a temporary foster for your kittens until you return. Please provide at least one week's notice to ensure that we can find a new foster for your kittens. If your trip is over a holiday, please provide a minimum of two weeks' notice. You cannot leave your foster kittens with an unauthorized person or pet sitter. We have specific training for foster parents, and pet sitters have not undergone that training or signed the release waivers for the foster program.

What if a foster kitten bites me?

If any of your foster pets bite you and break skin, causing you to bleed, you need to report the bite to the foster coordinator within 24 hours of when the bite occurred. The law requires that we report all bites. The teeth of the animal, not the nails, must have broken the skin. If you are unsure, then please report the bite anyway.

What if I want to adopt one of my foster kittens?

If you want to adopt a foster kitten, you will need to complete an adoption application and follow the full adoption process. If you do decide to adopt one of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator right away.

What if I know someone who's interested in adopting one of my foster kittens?

If someone you know is interested in adopting one of the kittens, please contact the foster coordinator and give her the details. Also, tell the prospective adopter to start the adoption process (filling out an adoption application) as soon as possible. Once the kitten is up for adoption, we cannot hold him/her for anyone, but we do want to accommodate referrals from foster parents if we can.

Will it be hard to say goodbye to my foster kittens?

Saying goodbye can be the most difficult part of fostering, but remember that we always have more kittens who need wonderful foster homes. Keep in mind that by fostering these vulnerable pets, you are playing a crucial role in helping to save lives.

Can I foster kittens to fulfill a community service obligation?

Unfortunately, Amarillo Rescue Coalition cannot sign off on court-ordered community service hours for fostering. Community service is supposed to be supervised work, and fostering is unsupervised, since it takes place in your home. If you need community service hours, volunteering is an option. You can sign up online through www.amarescuecoalition.com/volunteer.

Section 2: Preparing for your foster kittens

Your foster kittens should be separated from all other animals in your household and kept in a small area, such as a spare room or bathroom, where they have access to their food, water and litter box. And because kittens cannot regulate their body temperature, this area should also be in a warm, draft-free area. It may be a good idea to consider an area that is easy to clean up in terms of spills and litter box accidents, which will happen since the kittens are learning. Please don't put the kittens in a garage or place that has outdoor access; those locations are not safe.

Supplies you'll need

Amarillo Rescue Coalition will provide you with any supplies that you may need. However, we greatly appreciate any help that you can provide in supplying items for your foster kittens. Here's what you'll need to care for your foster kittens:

- At least one bowl for dry food and one for water: If you have a large litter, you will need to provide more than one bowl each for water and food.
- A supply of kitten food: All kittens will be fed Purina One kitten dry food and wet food, so they will need to be fed that brand of food (or better) in the foster home.
- New bottle for each bottle-fed litter and formula for bottle-feeding: KMR is the required brand of formula for bottle-feeding kittens.
- Litter box with low sides: More than one may be needed for larger litters.
- Non-clumping litter: Use pine pellets or clay litter.
- Heat source: Kittens can't keep themselves warm, so you have to provide a heat source. The Snuggle Safe microwave heating pad is recommended.
- A soft place to sleep: Old towels or blankets work well.
- A secure sleeping area: A cat carrier with the door removed or a box laid on its side work well. The SONGMICS Pet Playpen is great if you are able to invest in an easy setup and plan to continuously foster.
- Toys: Use kitten-safe toys that are easy to sanitize and clean. Kittens can play with them when you're not home.
- Scratching post: Kittens need to learn to scratch on them rather than the furniture.

Kitten-proofing your home

Foster kittens are tiny and cute, but just like children, they are also very curious. They will try to get into everything to explore, so you will need to kitten-proof your home. Here are some tips:

- Put away any small items that a kitten can swallow.
- Hide any breakable items, block electrical outlets and remove toxic plants.
- If your kittens are staying in a bathroom, make sure that the toilet lid is closed at all times.
- Block off any spaces that the kittens could crawl into and hide in.
- When setting up your kitten room, be sure to place the litter boxes as far away from food and water as possible.

Section 3: Scheduling appointments for your foster kittens

The foster coordinator will work with you to assess what age of kittens will meet your lifestyle and schedule.

When you and the foster coordinator have decided on kittens to pair you with, an appointment will be scheduled for someone to bring you the kittens and any supplies that you will need.

Please note: Kittens under the age of 8 weeks are at immediate risk of euthanasia in a shelter setting. Shelters do not have the staff or resources to provide the necessary care for them. We will do our best to transport kittens to you, but as these foster commitments are typically more urgent with getting them out before a deadline, you may need to arrange pick up for them first and we will bring supplies to you after.

Scheduling vaccines for your kittens

When you are matched with your foster kitten(s), you will receive an email that gives you access to their Petstablished profile. This specifies the dates that vaccines are due and any known medical conditions to treat. You can add notes in their profile as well for our team to view.

If you are fostering a kitten who is on medications, please make sure that he/she gets all prescribed doses. Do not end medication early for any reason. If your foster animal

has not responded to prescribed medications after five days (or in the time instructed by a veterinarian), please contact the foster coordinator.

Scheduling vet appointments for your kittens

Amarillo Rescue Coalition provides all medical care for our foster animals at our approved veterinary clinics. Because we are ultimately responsible for your foster kitten's well-being, our staff must authorize any and all treatment for foster cats at our approved veterinary partners.

If your foster kitten needs to go to the veterinarian, please notify the foster coordinator by email or phone. The foster coordinator will schedule the appointment and direct you where to go. The vet will not see the foster animal without an appointment setup by the foster coordinator.

For non-emergency situations, please understand that our veterinary partners book quickly and may not be available for same-day appointments.

Please note: If you wish to take your foster pet to a veterinarian who's not on the ARC list, you must first have approval from the foster coordinator or risk having to cover the costs yourself.

Picking up supplies

We do not have a brick and mortar facility, so all foster supplies for ARC are stored at board members homes. If you are running low on supplies you need for your kittens, please contact us so we can arrange getting it to you. If we do not have the item on hand, we will need to order it or purchase it for you.

Scheduling your kittens for spay/neuter

When your foster kittens weigh at least two pounds (900 grams), they can be spayed or neutered. If they are medically cleared by the veterinarian, we will schedule the surgery. If you will need assistance transporting them to or from their surgery appointment, please let the foster coordinator know before the appointment is set so we can find a volunteer to assist with this.

Section 4: Caring for your foster kittens

Because kittens are fragile, it is important for you to watch the behavior of your foster kittens closely and monitor their health daily. To keep track of their health, keep a journal of the kittens' weight, eating habits and overall health. You should weigh the kittens daily to ensure that they are growing, and record the weight in the journal.

Watch for signs of illness, including frequent crying, restlessness, weakness, coldness (hypothermia), diarrhea, dehydration, shallow or labored breathing, paleness or blueness in color. Notify the foster department immediately if a kitten is losing weight, is cold to the touch, or is having trouble breathing (either shallow or heavy breathing).

Kittens are susceptible to illness, so foster kittens must be kept indoors. If your personal cat has access to the outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster kittens. Also, please do not let your foster kittens ride loose in a car. Use a carrier at all times to transport kittens to and from appointments.

Caring for bottle-fed kittens

Bottle-feeding neonatal kittens requires an around-the-clock commitment. Thank you so much for offering your time and attention to these fragile babies. And please remember that we are here to support you. Here's some general info about bottle-feeding.

Milk preparation. You can pre-mix enough formula to last for 24 hours of feeding, but it must be refrigerated at all times. Discard all unused and mixed formula after 24 hours. Only heat enough formula for each feeding, and throw away any uneaten warmed formula after each feeding. Do not re-use warmed formula because harmful bacteria can develop in it.

Bottle-feeding tips. It is easier to feed your kittens when they are gently wrapped in a towel or blanket, instead of just using your hands. The towel or blanket is softer and warmer than your hands, and being wrapped up makes the kittens feel safer as they eat. If the kitten allows it, the forelegs should be free to allow him to "knead" with his feet. This kneading activity is essential to the kitten's muscle development and helps aid in digestion of the kitten's food. Also, be careful to position the kitten so that his belly is toward the floor. To decrease the chance of formula being aspirated into the lungs, kittens should not be fed on their backs.

Latching on. It may take a couple tries for a kitten to latch on to the bottle nipple. Just be patient; sometimes kittens need some encouragement to eat. Make sure that the nipple you are using on the bottle has an adequate flow of milk. When the nipple tip is punctured with a sterile needle, formula should drip out (one drop at a time, not a stream) when the bottle is inverted 180 degrees. Do not hesitate to call the foster department if you need any help or assistance with feeding your kittens. We are always here for you, ready to answer any questions that you may have.

Aspiration. If liquid bubbles out through the kitten's nose or he starts coughing, he may have gotten formula in his lungs. Pat the kitten very gently on the back to elicit a cough or sneeze, or hold him in an inverted position, tail over head, for a moment to remove the formula from his lungs. Please notify the foster department if this happens so we can determine if antibiotics or a vet visit is needed.

Peeing and pooping. Bottle-fed kittens need help with elimination, so you'll need to stimulate your kittens to pee and poop. After you feed them, wipe each kitten's back end with a baby wipe or warm wet cotton ball. Remember to do this every time you feed them. Document the color and consistency in your journal. Kittens should urinate after every meal and should poop at least once a day. The normal color of kitten poop is various shades of mustard and the consistency is similar as well. When a kitten is first introduced to formula, it is normal for him or her not to poop for 48 hours.

Signs of illness. Watch for signs of illness, including frequent crying, restlessness, weakness, coldness (hypothermia), diarrhea, dehydration, shallow or labored breathing, paleness or blueness in color. Notify the foster department immediately if a kitten is losing weight, is cold to the touch, or is having trouble breathing (either shallow or heavy breathing).

Keeping kittens warm. When kittens are infants (less than two weeks old), they can be kept in small carriers or playpens that can easily be covered by a blanket to maintain heat and reduce draftiness. As they grow and become more mobile, they will need more space to roam and play. Also, don't forget that kittens cannot regulate their body temperatures, so please keep a SnuggleSafe disc warm and with them at all times. Because kittens' skin is very sensitive and prone to thermal burns, the warming disc must be covered by a blanket and puppy pad that the kittens cannot burrow under.

Weighing. Please weigh the kittens before and after each feeding to ensure that they are growing, and record the weights in the journal.

How to bottle-feed kittens

Kittens will bottle-feed every two to four hours, depending on their age. Steps for bottle-feeding a kitten:

1. Warm the formula: Place the bottle in a bowl of hot water for a few minutes. Before feeding the kittens, always test the temperature of the formula by placing a few drops on your inner wrist to be sure it is not too hot. It should be slightly warmer than your body temperature.
2. Ensure that your foster kitten is warm before offering food. Do not attempt to feed a kitten who is chilled* because it can have serious health consequences.
3. Wrap the kitten in a towel or blanket and position him so that his belly is toward the floor. Kittens should not be fed on their backs or in an upright position.
4. Turn the bottle upside down and allow a drop of formula to come out. Place the bottle nipple in the kitten's mouth and gently move it back and forth, holding the bottle at a 45-degree angle to keep air from getting into the kitten's stomach. This movement should encourage the kitten to start eating. If at first you don't succeed, wait a few minutes and try again. Usually the kitten will latch on and begin to suckle. If the bottle appears to be collapsing, gently remove the nipple from the kitten's mouth and let more air return to the bottle.
5. Weigh each kitten before and after feeding and record the weights in your journal.

* A kitten's ideal body temperature is 100 to 102 degrees. If a kitten feels cold to the touch, contact the foster coordinator immediately. A kitten who is cold and unresponsive should be warmed right away. Place the kitten on an approved heating pad safely wrapped in two or three layers of towels. Turn the kitten side to side every 5 minutes. To stimulate blood flow, you may, ever so gently, massage the kitten with hand-rubbing.

Weaning kittens

Once your kittens are about four weeks old, it is time to start the weaning process. Your goal is to have the kittens eating on their own consistently by the time they're adopted. So, beginning at four weeks, start offering warm gruel (two parts wet food, one part formula) at all times, along with dry kitten food and water. Every four to six hours, discard any uneaten gruel and provide a fresh batch.

You will still be supplementing the kittens with a bottle every eight hours to ensure that they are getting all the nutrients they need, but encourage them to eat gruel before you offer a bottle. To get a kitten interested in trying the gruel, you may have to offer the gruel with a spoon or use your finger to place a small amount on the kitten's tongue. Ideally, by the end of five weeks, your foster kittens will be happily eating dry and wet food on their own.

It is important to continue weighing your foster kittens every day, after each feeding, to ensure that they are always gaining weight. During the weaning stage, you should also begin introducing the kittens to the litter box because they should be able to eliminate on their own by about four weeks of age.

Making formula

Mix two parts water with one part formula. Mix the powder and water until all clumps are gone. Remember, mixed formula only lasts for 24 hours.

Making gruel

Mix 1/2 can of wet food with 1/4 can of formula per kitten. You can add a little water if the kittens seem to like a looser consistency. It's OK make gruel in bulk and refrigerate it, but you'll need to warm it before offering it to the kittens.

Caring for independent eaters

By six to seven weeks old, your kittens should be independent eaters. Dry food should be their primary source of food, but offer wet food frequently as well to encourage eating and maximize growth. Replace the water in their water dish twice a day and wipe out the dish if needed.

During this stage, your daily responsibilities include socializing the kittens and exposing them to new situations and environments. It's important to try and keep all experiences positive for the kittens, so give them lots of treats and toys as they learn about new sounds, smells, places and faces. See Section 7 for more tips on how to successfully socialize your kittens.

As always, watch the behavior of your kittens and monitor their health daily. Continue to keep a journal detailing each foster kitten's weight, appetite, energy level and overall health. Weigh the kittens once a day, preferably around the same time, to minimize the variables when tracking the kittens' growth. Look over each kitten every day for physical changes or potential medical problems.

Now that the kittens are using a litter box, be sure to scoop the box at least two times daily. Every other day, dump the litter, clean the box with a mild detergent (such as dishwashing liquid) and put in fresh litter. You'll want to monitor the kittens for diarrhea, and clean the litter box more frequently if diarrhea is apparent. For more info on litter box training, see the appendix, and for details about instilling good litter box habits, see Section 7.

At this stage, play with the kittens several times a day with interactive toys. Play time provides stimulation, encourages socialization and releases excess energy. Try a variety of toys (balls, squeaky toys, feather toys, etc.) to see which ones your foster kittens like. Cat toys don't have to be fancy or expensive. Cats often enjoy playing with something as simple as a paper bag (remove the handles for safety) or a box with holes cut in the sides.

Don't leave your foster kittens alone with any toys that could be easily ingested or cause harm to them. Examples are string toys, yarn and Da Bird (feathers dangling from a string and wand). Toys such as ping-pong balls and toilet paper tubes are safe. Also, it may seem cute, but discourage your foster kittens from play-biting your hands and feet. This is something that adopters may not find desirable.

Cleaning up between litters

Once your kittens have been adopted, you must sanitize your fostering room or area before you can take home a new batch of kittens. Remove anything the kittens touched and clean it with a weak bleach solution, consisting of one part bleach to 32 parts cold water.

If you have items that can be washed in the dishwasher, please do so since the heat will disinfect those items. Plastic or metal items that need to be sterilized, such as litter boxes or plastic toys, should be soaked in the bleach solution for 10 minutes and then rinsed off. Wash all bedding with bleach and hot water, and throw away any toys that cannot be sterilized. Being conscientious about sterilization will help ensure that your next foster group will not catch any illnesses from the previous group of kittens.

Quick feeding guide

We will provide you with very detailed training regarding feeding before you take your foster kittens home. But here's a brief summary of the feeding protocol for kittens up to eight weeks old:

Week 1: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 2–3 hours (8–12 times per day)

Amount: 3–4 cc per feeding, approximately 3–6 g per kitten

Week 2: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 3 hours (8 times per day)

Amount: 5–6 cc per feeding, approximately 8–15 g per kitten

Week 3: Bottle-feeding

Food type: Milk replacement formula

Frequency: Every 4 hours (6 times per day)

Amount: 13–17 cc per feeding, approximately 10–20 g per kitten

Week 4: Weaning stage

Food type: Milk replacement formula, gruel, kitten kibble and water

Frequency: Kibble, water and gruel should be available to kittens at all times; bottle-feed every 8 hours (3 times per day)

Amount: 13–17 cc per feeding with the bottle; will vary depending on how much gruel the kitten eats

Weeks 5–8: Solid food

Food type: Dry kitten food, wet kitten food and water

Frequency: Available at all times

You will need to offer fresh wet food 2 to 3 times daily.

Section 5: Fostering moms and kittens

Mother cats, also known as “queens,” need to be in a calm environment so that they can be stress-free and feel like they are keeping their kittens safe. Sometimes, stress can cause a mother cat to become aggressive or to not care for her babies properly.

With that in mind, choose a private and quiet room of your home, away from the daily activities of your family, in which to situate the mother cat and her kittens.

It’s also important that they be kept away from other pets in the home. Other pets can be perceived as a threat by the mother cat and cause her to act aggressively to protect her young. If you have children and an active home, it may be best to foster when the kittens are four weeks or older. Sometimes mother cats will behave less defensively if their kittens are older.

Bringing everyone home

Set up your fostering room before you bring the mother cat and her kittens home. You should put the litter box as far away from the mother cat’s food and water bowls as possible, and provide a couple of different safe places where she can care for her kittens. A dark area equipped with a whelping box is ideal.

A whelping box is a box that is large enough for the mother cat to lie on her side slightly away from her kittens with all of the kittens in the box with her. The box should have sides high enough to prevent the kittens from wandering away, but low enough so it’s easy for the mother cat to come and go as she needs to. Lining the bottom of the box with puppy pads topped with newspapers will help absorb moisture. You can place an easy-to-clean blanket on top of the absorbent materials to give the mother cat and kittens a soft place to lie on. Please keep all these materials dry so that the kittens are not chilled by dampness. Do not place straw, hay or shavings in the area where the mother and kittens are kept.

When you bring your foster kittens and their mom home, put them all in the fostering room and close the door, allowing the mom to explore on her own. Give her a couple of hours before you enter her room and don’t be alarmed if it takes a few days for her to stop hiding.

Mom's care of her kittens

The momma cat should take care of her kittens by herself for at least three to four weeks before she starts the weaning process for her babies. Each momma cat that you foster will be slightly different in her level of attentiveness, but there are three basic stages of nursing (see below). If for any reason your momma cat is not performing one of the listed functions, please notify the foster coordinator right away to evaluate whether the mom has a medical concern that we need to address.

Kittens are born blind, but they can feel their mother's heat and seek her out to begin nursing within two hours of being born. Mother cats should be lying on their sides to ensure that their kittens can find the nipples for nursing. Here are three stages of nursing:

- One to two weeks old: The mother cat initiates nursing by licking her kittens to wake them up and curling her body around them. After she wakes all of her babies, the kittens search for a short time period and then quickly latch on.
- Two to three weeks old: The kittens' eyes and ears begin to function and they start to explore beyond the nesting area. This is when the kittens start interacting and playing with their mother. At this age, the kittens start to initiate some of the nursing and momma should comply by lying in the nursing position.
- Four to five weeks old: The kittens begin weaning and, in turn, the mother cat no longer initiates any nursing. If the mother cat still allows the kittens to nurse, it will be initiated by the kittens and can be lateral or upright nursing.

Occasionally, mom cats develop mastitis when their kittens stop nursing and begin to eat on their own. Mastitis occurs when the mammary glands inflame and harden, creating a very painful infection for the mother cat and causing symptoms such as a fever and listlessness. If you think your mother cat may have mastitis, call the foster coordinator on the next business day. This is not an emergency condition.

The mother cat will groom and lick her babies frequently for the first two to four weeks. She will stimulate her kittens to pee and poop, and will generally consume the fecal matter and urine. As the babies become more mobile, they will start to leave the nest and deposit urine and feces nearby, which is a good time to start introducing a couple of low-sided litter boxes (disposable tend to work best).

To ensure that the mother cat has enough to eat, give her access to both wet and dry food at all times. Food intake for a nursing mother can be two to four times the amount eaten by a cat who's not nursing.

When fostering a momma cat, it is very important to observe her behavior daily and watch her interactions with her kittens to spot any problems. Unfortunately, 8 percent of kittens pass away because of inadequate maternal care. This can happen for many different reasons, some of which are beyond our control.

Problem behaviors in momma cats

Here are some details about problem behaviors in momma cats and what you can do about them.

Maternal neglect. Sometimes a mother cat stops providing care to one or all of her kittens. The neglect may be because of a birth defect or weakness in the kitten; she may just be trying to follow nature's course, focusing her attention on the stronger kittens. Neglect may also happen because she is inexperienced or she's in a stressful environment. Either way, that's why it's so important to make daily observations to ensure that she is caring for her babies. If she will let you handle the kittens, you should weigh each kitten once a day to ensure that they are gaining weight. If you notice that she is spending all of her time away from the kittens, is not grooming or nursing them frequently, or doesn't respond to their cries, please call the foster coordinator right away.

Maternal aggression toward other animals. Aggressive behavior directed at other animals is common and expected from mother cats because they have a maternal instinct to protect their young at all times. With that in mind, please do not try to introduce her to the other animals in your home. As mentioned above, the mom cat and her kittens should have a quiet room of their own away from all other pets so that she and her babies can always feel safe. If she has seen another animal and becomes stressed or aggressive, it is very important to leave her alone and not try to comfort her. Give her 20 minutes or so to calm down and then check on her.

Maternal aggression toward people. Sometimes mother cats will act aggressively toward people. These behaviors may include hissing, growling, swatting and biting. Again, the mother is merely trying to protect her young. We evaluate mom cats for these behaviors before sending them into foster homes, but sometimes the behaviors develop later. If you have a mother exhibiting these behaviors, do not try to "correct" the behavior with a spray bottle or any type of punishment. She is only acting out of instinct to protect her babies and you could cause her aggressive behavior to escalate.

Contact the foster coordinator at the first sign of any of the above behaviors so we can assess the situation and decide on the safest option for momma and her babies.

Separating kittens and moms

If all of your foster animals, mom included, are healthy and friendly, we have no reason to separate mom from kittens before they are eight weeks old. But there are a few medical or behavioral reasons for separating them earlier than eight weeks:

- As mentioned above, if the mother cat is showing signs of maternal neglect and is no longer caring for her kittens, the foster coordinator may decide to separate her from her kittens.
- If the mother cat is semi-feral or very undersocialized, we may decide to separate the kittens once they are eating on their own consistently and no longer need to nurse (around four to five weeks old). Separating them would prevent the kittens from learning feral behaviors from their mother and help them to become socialized, which increases their chances of finding forever homes.
- If there is a medical concern about the mom or babies, a veterinarian could make the decision to separate the kittens from the mother cat.

The kittens' best chance at survival is to stay with their mom. Please do not separate your foster kittens from their mom for any reason, or attempt to supplement the mother's milk with formula, without consulting the foster coordinator.

Section 6: Medical and emergency protocols

As previously stated in Section 3, when you are matched with your foster kittens, you will receive an email that gives you access to their Petestablished profile. This specifies the dates that vaccines are due and any known medical conditions to treat. You can add notes in their profile as well for our team to view.

If you are fostering a cat who is on medications, please make sure that he/she gets all prescribed doses. Do not end medication early for any reason. If your foster animal has not responded to prescribed medications after five days (or in the time instructed by a veterinarian), please contact the foster coordinator.

Veterinary care

Amarillo Rescue Coalition provides all medical care for our foster animals at our approved veterinary clinics. Because we are ultimately responsible for your foster cat's

well-being, our staff must authorize any and all treatment for foster cats at our approved veterinary partners.

If your foster cat needs to go to the veterinarian, please notify the foster coordinator by email or phone. The foster coordinator will schedule the appointment and direct you where to go. The vet will not see the foster animal without an appointment setup by the foster coordinator.

For non-emergency situations, please understand that our veterinary partners book quickly and may not be available for same-day appointments.

Please note: If you wish to take your foster pet to a veterinarian who's not on the ARC list, you must first have approval from the foster coordinator or risk having to cover the costs yourself.

Signs of illness and what to do next

Kittens do a good job of masking when they don't feel well, so determining if a foster kitten is under the weather will require diligent observation of the kittens' daily activity and appetite levels. Be aware that kittens act differently at different ages. For example, a healthy two-week-old kitten will sleep often and get up only to nurse, whereas a healthy six-week-old kitten should have a lot of energy. If you have any questions about the health of your foster kittens, please contact the foster coordinator, who will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Eye discharge. It is normal for kittens to have some discharge from their eyes when they wake up. But if a kitten has yellow or green discharge, or swelling around the eyes (making it hard for him to open his eyes), or the third eyelid is showing, you need to contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

Sneezing and nasal discharge. Occasional sneezing is common in kittens. If the sneezing becomes more frequent, examine the discharge coming from the sneeze. If the discharge is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be necessary. But it is important to monitor the kittens in case the problem becomes worse. If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment because the kittens may have a bacterial infection. Be sure to monitor the kittens' breathing. If they start to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator immediately and follow the emergency contact protocol. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the kittens' eating habits more closely to ensure that they are still eating. And, of course, continue to weigh them daily.

Loss of appetite. Your foster kittens may be stressed after arriving in your home, and stress can cause lack of appetite. Unwillingness to eat in kittens can be very serious, so pay close attention to whether the kittens are eating. Kittens should eat on a four- to eight-hour schedule, depending on their age. If a kitten under four weeks old misses two meals or a kitten over four weeks of age goes more than 12 hours without eating, the foster coordinator should be called. Also, if a kitten less than eight weeks old does not urinate for over 12 hours, call the coordinator. With a kitten who is not eating, please do not change the kitten's diet without contacting the foster department. An abrupt change in diet can cause diarrhea, which will lead to dehydration.

Lethargy. The activity level of your kittens will vary with each kitten in your litter and with age. Sick kittens may have lower energy levels and just want to sit in your lap or on the floor and not move much or play. If you notice a drop in your foster kittens' energy level, please contact the foster coordinator to make a medical appointment. If a kitten cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, this is an emergency, so you'll need to start the emergency contact protocol. Note: Some undersocialized kittens will move less because they are frightened. If you have a fearful group of kittens, it can be more difficult to determine if their energy levels are low. But tracking all behaviors in your journal will help you decide whether you should call the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

Dehydration. Dehydration is usually associated with diarrhea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite. To test for dehydration, gently pinch the kitten's skin around the scruff area. If the skin stays taut, the kitten is dehydrated. Please call the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency contact protocol, as dehydration can be fatal in kittens.

Vomiting. If a foster kitten has thrown up two or more times in one day, please notify the foster coordinator. If there is bile or blood in the vomit, please call right away.

Pain or strain while urinating. When kittens first go into a foster home, they may not urinate due to stress. If a kitten hasn't urinated in more than 24 hours, however, please contact the foster coordinator. Also, if you notice the kitten straining to urinate with little or no results, or crying out when urinating, please contact the foster coordinator immediately because it may be indicative of an infection or a urethral obstruction, which can be life-threatening.

Diarrhea. In kittens, it can be tricky to determine if diarrhea is a problem. Soft stool diarrhea, most likely caused by stress, is normal for the first two days after you take kittens home. Kittens who are nursing tend to have loose stool, but if it is watery or very

large in volume, that's a concern. By the time kittens are five weeks old and are eating consistently on their own, they should have firm, normal stool. If your foster kittens have liquid stool, please contact the foster department so that a vet appointment can be scheduled; the kittens may need medication.

Once your kittens are using a litter box, please monitor the box daily. Remember that diarrhea will dehydrate your kittens, so be proactive about contacting the foster department if you notice any diarrhea. If a kitten has bloody or mucoid diarrhea, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol.

Frequent ear scratching. A foster kitten may have ear mites if she scratches her ears often and/or shakes her head frequently, or if you see a dark discharge that resembles coffee grounds when you look in her ears. Ear mites can be treated by a veterinarian, so please call or email the foster coordinator for a medical appointment.

Hair loss. Please contact the foster department if you notice any hair loss on your foster kittens. It is normal for cats to have thin fur around the lips, eyelids and in front of the ears, but clumpy patches of hair loss or thinning hair can indicate ringworm or dermatitis. It is important to check your foster kittens' coats every day.

Serious kitten ailments

Kittens are susceptible to these illnesses:

- Fading kitten syndrome: Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, dehydration, lethargy, weight loss, coldness to the touch, and difficulty with breathing or labored breathing.
- Panleukopenia (feline distemper): Symptoms include unwillingness to eat, vomiting, diarrhea and/or dehydration. The diarrhea often has a mucoid texture and/or is bloody.

If a kitten is displaying any combination of the symptoms listed above, please contact the foster coordinator immediately and start the emergency phone protocol. These ailments can be fatal if left untreated.

Criteria for emergencies

What constitutes a medical emergency in a kitten? A good rule of thumb is any situation in which you would call 911 for a person. Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

- Not breathing or labored breathing
- Symptoms of fading kitten syndrome or distemper (see “Serious Kitten Ailments” above)
- Signs of extreme dehydration: dry gums, weakness, vomiting, not urinating, skin tenting (when the skin is pulled up, it stays there)
- Abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
- Unconsciousness or unable to wake up
- Cold to the touch
- Broken bones
- Any trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on
- A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn’t stop when pressure is applied
- Loss of appetite for more than 12 hours

If a foster kitten displays any of these symptoms, please follow the emergency phone protocol. If the animal is vomiting or has diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, you can probably wait until the next day to get help. However, if the animal is lethargic and shows no interest in food or water, start the emergency phone protocol.

If you think your foster pet may incur permanent damage or pass away if not seen by a veterinarian immediately, please proceed to the approved emergency clinic and start the emergency phone chain on the way.

Section 7: Socializing and instilling good behaviors in kittens

Your goal as a foster parent is to prepare your foster kittens for forever homes. While a big part of that is helping the kittens to grow and be healthy, another component is helping them develop the good habits that will make them wonderful companions for their adopters.

Establishing good litter box habits

Start introducing your kittens to the litter box around the age of four to five weeks. Make sure the litter box you are using has low sides, to make it easy for the kittens to climb in and out. Some foster parents like to use disposable litter boxes, and that's fine. Keep kittens confined to a small area and have at least one litter box in each room that the kittens can access. You can encourage the kittens to use the bathroom facilities by gently returning them to their litter box every 15–20 minutes while they're playing.

You also want to make sure that you are scooping the litter box at least twice a day, more if you have a large litter or they have diarrhea. You will also need to dump the litter box entirely every two to three days and clean with dish soap. A clean litter box will promote good bathroom habits for the kittens going forward. If your foster kittens are not using the litter box, please notify the foster coordinator so you can start resolving the issue before it becomes a habit.

Oftentimes, kittens miss the litter box if they have medical issues like diarrhea, or if they have too much free space, causing them to forget where the box is when they have to go. Clean all accidents with an enzymatic cleaner and don't ever punish a kitten for having an accident.

For more info about litter box training, see the appendix.

Discipline

One of your goals as a foster parent is to help prepare your foster kittens for living successfully in a home. So, we ask that you help your foster kittens to develop good habits and skills through the use of positive reinforcement, which builds a bond of trust between you and your foster pets. The basic idea is to reward desirable behaviors and ignore unwanted behaviors.

You must not punish the kittens for behavior that you find undesirable because punishment is ineffective at eliminating the behavior. If a kitten is doing something undesirable, distract him or her before the behavior occurs. It is also important for every human in the foster home to stick to the rules established for your foster pets, which will help them to learn faster.

Play time

Play time is a very important part of kitten development. It is crucial for young kittens to have other kittens to wrestle with in order to develop appropriate play skills and be properly socialized with other kittens. Kittens also need toys to play with so that they can get physical exercise and mental stimulation. There are two types of toys that help with kitten development:

- Solo toys are things the kittens can play with when you aren't there. These toys should be easy to clean and impossible for the kittens to consume. Examples are ping pong balls, toilet paper tubes, bottle corks and plastic shower curtain rings.
- Interactive toys are things that you use to engage the kittens in play. Examples are Da Bird (a feather dangling from a string) and other toys with yarn or string attached. Don't leave kittens alone with these toys, since they can easily strangle or be ingested by the kittens.

During play time, it is always important to discourage kittens from biting your hands and feet. It may seem cute, but we want to avoid teaching kittens a habit that adopters may find undesirable.

Socializing and handling

Introducing your foster kittens to new things and new experiences will also help prepare them for living happily in forever homes. Follow these rules to positively expose your kittens to new people, environments and noises:

- New people: Introducing your foster animals to new people will help them become well-adjusted adult cats. Monitor all interactions with new people, though, to ensure that they are positive, not scary, experiences for the kittens. Have new people give gentle pets and treats to the kittens and interact with them using fun toys. If children are visiting, they must always be supervised until they are old enough to understand how to gently interact with a kitten.
- New environments: It will help the kittens' adjustment into adopters' homes if you can allow your kittens to experience different parts of your home. Whenever you introduce the kittens to a new space, provide lots of treats and play with interactive toys so that the kittens associate the new space with their favorite things. Keep the exploratory sessions brief so you don't overwhelm your kittens, and return them to their living space if they do seem overwhelmed or scared.
- New noises: It is beneficial to expose kittens to a variety of normal household noises but, again, try to do it in a positive way. The key is to introduce different

noises gradually. For example, start by keeping a radio on low volume and gradually increase the volume over a few days. Another example: Run the vacuum in another room at first, with your kittens at a safe distance. Then, over the course of a few days, move the vacuum noise closer to their room. If another person plays with the kittens while you make the noise, it may help alleviate any stress or fear that they may feel. Some kittens are naturally fearful, so just go even slower with the timid ones.

Another thing you can work on with your foster kittens is getting them comfortable with being in a cat carrier. When you are not using the carrier for transportation, leave the carrier (with the door removed or securely propped open) in your foster kittens' room. Put toys, treats and a soft blanket in the carrier, to encourage the kittens to go in and spend time there.

Schedule for successful socialization

If your foster kittens are not socialized at all when you bring them home, you'll need to have a more focused socialization plan. Remember, keep all experiences positive for the kittens.

Days 1–7: Your foster kittens may be hissing, swatting, spitting and/or growling.

Activities to engage in:

- “Burrito-wrapping” the kitten in a blanket or towel: Use gloves and a towel to handle the kitten if needed.
- Hand-feeding: Feed the kittens dabs of baby food (protein only, with no onion or garlic on the ingredients list) or canned tuna by hand.
- Picking up and returning: Repeatedly pick up each kitten and return him/her to their safe space.
- Playing: Try engaging the kittens in play with interactive toys.

Days 7–14: The kittens may hiss when you approach, but respond to touching and petting.

Activities to engage in:

- Handling: Continue handling and petting the kittens. If improvement is shown, try to move to handling other body parts, but do not go too fast.
- More playing: Start standing and walking around while playing with the kittens, to get them used to normal human movement.

- More hand-feeding: Give the kittens treats while you handle them, to help them learn that you are not a threat.

After 14 days: Your kittens may still be shy, but should be more comfortable with you approaching them and should no longer display defensive aggression behaviors. If your kittens do not show improvement at all after two weeks of attempts at socialization, please contact the foster department for guidance.

Thank you so much for opening up your heart and your home to foster pets. Together, we can make an impact for Amarillo shelter pets!

Emergency Phone Protocol

If you are experiencing an emergency situation with your foster pet, please call 806-680-6820 immediately. If you do not receive an answer on the first try, send a text message, you will get a call back as soon as someone is available.

The only 24 hour emergency veterinary clinic in Amarillo will be used for life or death emergencies, the foster coordinator or ARC Team Member will notify you if the foster cat needs to be taken to this clinic. If our partner veterinarians are open, we will refer you to the office of our choice for emergency care.

Small Animal Emergency Clinic
5127 Canyon Drive
Amarillo, Texas 79110

Appendix

Guiding your foster kittens' behavior

Kittens need to be socialized to interact appropriately with both humans and other cats. When you socialize kittens to humans, you're helping to create happy, healthy adult cats who will make wonderful pets. That's why it's so important to handle, talk to and play with your foster kittens.

Well-socialized mother cats are more likely to have well-socialized kittens. The kittens will pick up on whether their mother is calm or fearful around people. If there is no mother cat, kittens can still learn from their litter mates. Play helps to increase social, coordination and learning skills.

A healthy mother-kitten relationship

A mother's direct interaction with her kittens includes the "brrp" or chirping calls she makes as she approaches them, as well as nuzzling and licking them to awaken them and to stimulate urination and defecation.

Initially, the kitten's activities are restricted to crawling along the mother's body and nuzzling against her to locate a nipple, often in competition with litter mates. The kittens suckle, lie still by the mother, move around near her and call out to her.

A call frequently given by the kittens is the cry associated with distress. It is given when a kitten awakens and is hungry, when a kitten's movement is restricted (e.g., the kitten is trapped under the mother) or he becomes isolated and cold. The mother should answer the call.

Suckling is accompanied by kneading against the mother's abdomen. It is thought that these kneading movements stimulate the mother's milk flow, help to develop the kitten's muscles and aid in digestion. The kittens may initially spend about eight hours a day suckling, but this activity decreases as they grow older.

As the kittens become older and more mobile, they become increasingly responsible for approaching the mother and initiating suckling. In the later stages of the weaning period (at about seven weeks old), the kittens become almost wholly responsible for initiating

suckling. The mother may actively impede these efforts by blocking access to her nipples or by removing herself from the kittens' proximity.

If you notice that the mother cat is neglecting her kittens inappropriately or showing any other negative behaviors mentioned in this manual, please contact the foster coordinator.

Kitten development and what you can do

Time and effort are required to properly socialize kittens. In fact, when they're between four and twelve weeks old, daily socialization sessions are important in shaping the kitten's personality and emotional growth.

You'll want your foster kittens to become familiar with having their paws touched (front and back), their mouths opened and their ears touched. Combining this type of handling with regular grooming sessions and body massages helps to prevent skin sensitivity or aversion to touch. And acquainting kittens with a variety of sights, sounds and textures will help them to grow into well-socialized adult cats. Listed below are some characteristics of kittens at different stages and the steps you can take to help socialize them.

Newborn

Appearance: Newborn kittens should be pink, firm, plump and generally healthy-looking.

Temperature: Normal rectal temperature for newborns is 96 or 97 degrees Fahrenheit.

Eyes and ears: Closed, but they can still hear (though poorly) and respond to bright light with a blink reflex.

Muscles: Healthy kittens will curl their bodies and limbs inward.

1 to 2 weeks

Temperature: Normal rectal temperature has gradually increased to 100 degrees F.

Eyes and ears: Open at approximately 11-15 days.

Muscles: Kittens can use their front legs to stand and walk shakily.

What you can do: You can engage in gentle handling and cuddling at this point. These sessions should be very short (one to two minutes), and great care should be taken in the handling process. Rub the hair coat gently with your hands, and gently finger the webbing in between the toes. Rub the ears and muzzle.

2 to 3 weeks

Temperature: Kittens are able to maintain their own body temperature within the normal range (100.5 – 102.5 degrees F).

Eyes: Vision is initially poor, even after the eyes have opened, but continues to develop until three to four weeks of age. If the eyes fail to open and the lids look sticky, wipe the lids very gently with dampened cotton lightly smeared with a little petroleum jelly to ease their opening. The eyelids should never be pulled apart. If a kitten's eyelids still haven't opened by 14 days, contact the foster department.

Muscles: The rear legs can now support the body. Kittens are crawling.

Teeth: Deciduous incisors start to appear, followed by deciduous canines.

What you can do:

- Provide the kittens with a whelping box area for sleeping and another area, away from the sleeping and feeding area, that contains the litter box.
- Provide five minutes of handling exercises. Gently roll the kitten over on her back for 5-10 seconds, and then draw her close to you, stroking and cuddling her. Never do this while actively feeding the kitten. Be careful not to startle the kitten with sudden movements or loud sounds.
- Start grooming: Softly and gently brush the kitten's coat with a few strokes, touch the ears and mouth, and pretend to clip the nails by adding gentle pressure to the kitten's paws.

3 to 4 weeks

Eyes and ears: Vision and hearing are normal. Blink response disappears with the development of accurate pupil control. The kitten is now able to use visual clues to locate and approach the mother. The eyes should be completely open by 17 days.

Muscles: By 21 days, kittens can walk with a fairly steady gait. They can also sit and have reasonable control of their toes.

Teeth: Deciduous incisors and canine teeth continue to come in.

What you can do:

- If the mother and kittens are no longer using the whelping box, it's OK to remove it.
- At about four weeks old, the kittens will begin to eliminate on their own. This is a good time to introduce additional litter boxes. Use boxes with low edges so that the kittens can easily climb in and out. Only use non-clumping litter, since kittens often try to eat the litter when they are learning.
- The kittens will start to explore their immediate environment. Provide safe, simple toys to help stimulate them.

- The kittens can be introduced to other people at this time, but this interaction should be carefully controlled. The interaction should be limited to five minutes of time spent in gentle massage and cuddling.
- As the main caregiver, you should continue the grooming and handling exercises: holding, cuddling and stroking each kitten's body, including ears, tail and muzzle.

4 to 5 weeks

Eyes and ears: Vision is markedly improved. From three to five weeks, kittens learn guided paw placement and obstacle avoidance.

Muscles: Kittens are walking normally and start climbing. Social play is prevalent.

Teeth: Deciduous premolars come in.

What you can do: Continue the handling and socialization exercises.

5 to 8 weeks of age

Temperature: Normal range is 100.5 degrees to 102.5 degrees F.

Teeth: Kittens have an entire set of deciduous teeth by five to six weeks of age.

What you can do:

- The kittens are totally dependent on the environment you provide to stimulate and develop them. Play with objects increases around seven to eight weeks of age, so continue to add appropriate toys to the kittens' environment.
- Introduce the kittens to as many different people as possible — people of different shapes, sizes, colors, sexes and ages. Encourage the kittens to allow individual handling by different people: men, women and supervised children. Keep the visits short.
- Expose the kittens to mild sounds, different areas and surfaces, allowing them to investigate.
- As the main caregiver, you should continue the handling and grooming exercises.
- If you choose to, you can introduce the kittens to other animals while their mother is not around. Keep the visits very short and always supervise them. These visits should be calm and pleasant; a traumatic incident at this stage could have a lasting effect on the kittens. Keep in mind that kittens can carry diseases that can be transmitted to other animals.

8 weeks or older

What you can do:

- Protect the kittens from unpleasant or negative experiences. The kittens' environment should be designed to help them develop a sense of security.
- Continue to introduce the kittens to as many different people as possible.
- Continue the handling and grooming exercises.
- At this stage, you can gradually introduce some more intrusive noises, such as whistles blowing, hands clapping, bells jingling and the vacuum cleaner running. Play with the kittens as you introduce the noise in the background.

Modified from the Humane Society of Boulder Valley Cat and Kitten Handbook

Litter box training for kittens and cats

When kittens are about four weeks old, they will begin to play in, dig through and explore loose, soft materials such as dirt or litter. As a result of this investigative digging, kittens begin to relieve themselves in these materials. So, kittens do not have to be taught by either their mothers or humans to relieve themselves in soft, loose materials, or to dig and bury their waste. Kittens are simply born knowing how to do it.

It's not necessary to take kittens to the litter box and move their paws back and forth in the litter. Doing so may actually be an unpleasant experience for them, causing them to have some negative associations with the litter box.

However, litter boxes that don't provide an acceptable place to eliminate (from the cats' point of view) may cause cats to relieve themselves elsewhere. That's why it's important to provide a litter box that meets the kittens' needs. You want the kittens to like the box and use it consistently.

Location

Most people want to put the litter box in an out-of-the-way place so they can minimize odors and loose particles of cat litter around the house. Often, the litter box ends up in the basement, possibly next to an appliance on a cold cement floor.

But that type of location is often undesirable to cats. Young kittens may not be able to get down a long flight of stairs in time to relieve themselves. And adult cats new to a home may not remember where the litter box is if it's hidden away in a distant location.

Another thing to keep in mind is that if your litter box is next to a sometimes-noisy appliance, such as a furnace, washer or dryer, cats may become startled when the appliance turns on. This may cause them to associate the litter box with the frightening noise, and they may then refuse to use the box in that location. Also, some cats like to scratch the surface surrounding their litter box and they may find a cold cement floor unappealing.

You can compromise by placing the litter box in a location — such as a closet or spare bathroom — that gives the cat some privacy, but is also conveniently located. If you place the litter box in a closet, make sure the closet door is wedged open from both sides to keep the cat from being trapped inside or outside of the closet. If the litter box sits on a smooth, slick or cold surface, consider putting a small throw rug or mat underneath the box. The cats will have something to scratch and less litter will be tracked through your house.

Type and depth of litter

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters. Clumping litters are usually finer in grain than typical clay litter. With kittens younger than eight weeks, though, use only non-clumping litter. The reason for this is that very young kittens tend to taste their litter and play in it. If you use clumping litter, the dust from the litter can solidify in their respiratory or digestive tracts.

Different cats prefer different depths of litter, but most cats don't like litter that's more than about two inches deep. Cats don't choose areas for elimination where they sink into several inches of litter or dirt. It's not true that the more litter you put into a litter box, the less often you will have to clean it. Regular cleaning is essential, regardless of the depth of the litter.

Number of boxes

Try to have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, no one can be prevented from using the box because it is already occupied. It also keeps one cat from "guarding" the litter box and preventing other cats from accessing it.

Litter boxes can be placed in several locations around the house. This practice helps to train young kittens because there's always a box nearby that they can get to in time to eliminate.

To cover or not to cover

Many cats don't show any preference for a covered versus a non-covered litter box. But if a cat is very large, a covered litter box may not allow sufficient room for him to turn around, scratch and dig, and position himself in the way he prefers. It's better to use uncovered boxes when training kittens because it is easier for them to get into and out of the litter box.

A covered box tends to provide more privacy and may be preferred by shy, timid cats. It's a good idea to offer both types of litter boxes to discover which one the cat prefers. If you don't want to buy a covered box in order to find out which one your cat prefers, a litter box cover can be made from an upside-down cardboard box with the flaps and one side cut away.

Cleaning the box

Litter boxes should always be kept clean. Feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. The number of cats and the number of litter boxes will determine how often the litter needs to be dumped and completely changed. Twice a week is a general guideline, but you may need to change it more or less often, depending on the circumstances. If you notice any odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it is time to change all the litter.

When washing the litter box, do not use strong-smelling chemicals or cleaning products because the smell of vinegar, bleach or pine cleaners may cause the cat to avoid using the litter box. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient. Letting the container air-dry is also a good idea, but it will be necessary to have a back-up litter box while the other one is being cleaned.

Modified from the Humane Society of Boulder Valley Cat and Kitten Handbook