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Fostering can create lifelong bonds because some foster families end up adopting their foster kittens and welcoming them into their forever homes.



Fostering Kittens

Fostering kittens can help them become well-adjusted, healthy cats and increase the chances they will be adopted.

With kitten season in full swing, there's an urgent—and adorable—need for cat lovers to temporarily open their homes and hearts to little ones in need.

BY JEN REEDER

Each year, Holly Sizemore brightens her summer by fostering kittens.

"I always invite friends over because it's good to have the kittens be exposed to lots of different people. So the friends have a glass of wine in the kitten room with me and we just chitchat and play with kittens," she says. "You cannot help but have your mood elevated—the kitten antics just keep you laughing."

As chief mission officer for the nonprofit Best Friends Animal Society in Salt Lake City, New York City, Atlanta, Los Angeles and other locations, Sizemore is well aware that her fun activity also saves lives. Kittens typically can't stay in a shelter until their immune systems strengthen when they're around 8 weeks old. Plus, they need to be bottle-fed every few hours for their first several weeks. So animal shelters and rescue organizations depend on cat lovers temporarily opening their homes to care for kittens to give them a chance at life and help ready them for adoption.

"There's always an urgent need for foster homes," Sizemore says. "They provide that temporary, short-term safe space that literally saves that animal's life."

The need peaks in warmer months with longer days when cats mate—aka "kitten season." In sunny Los Angeles, kitten season spans April to November, according to Tina Reddington Fried, senior director of Los Angeles Feline Programs at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

"Kitten season is not as cute as it sounds, unfortunately," she says. "Over 3.2 million cats come into U.S. animal shelters nationwide every year, and the majority of those cats enter during kitten season."

ASPCA volunteers in Los Angeles have fostered more than 10,000 kittens since 2017—a milestone also reached by ASPCA fosters in New York City.

"Here's the sad thing though: That is a huge number and it's a drop in the bucket," she says. "There are so many kittens who need help."

Even fostering for a week or two can make a huge difference for

shelters and, of course, kittens. Fried says the easiest age group is 4 to 8 weeks old—“Get some really cute Instagram shots and have nice cuddle times”—but some volunteers prefer to specialize in more challenging cases.

For instance, “Bottle Baby Fosters” offers round-the-clock care to the youngest kittens. “Fungus Fighters” takes care of kitties with ringworm. “Lion Tamers” provides socialization skills to hissy kittens. But the nonprofit is grateful to all fosters.

“We’re thrilled about 10,000 kittens have been saved and we’re excited to save even more,” she says.

LOVING THE LITTLE ONES

It’s a passion shared by cat lovers across the country. Susan Spaulding, aka the “Kitten Mom,” co-founded the Gainesville, Virginia, nonprofit National Kitten Coalition in 2008 to educate the public and professionals about kitten care to increase survival rates. She’s currently director of Neonatal Programs and loves teaching people about bottle-feeding—typically for kittens under 4 weeks old.

When you find a kitten without her mother (see sidebar), prioritize getting her warm and stable before offering food (kittens can’t digest food when they’re cold and can get sick or die). Use kitten formula—never cow’s milk, she cautions.

With a kitten bottle, feed the kitten in a prone position on her stomach (they can aspirate if held up like a human baby).

“Try and imagine what the mom cat does,” Spaulding advises. “When kittens are nursing, they’re on their stomachs.”

Spaulding emphasizes that kittens must be weighed every day on an inexpensive postage or food scale to make sure they’re gaining weight.

“Age is not an illness,” she says. “Just because they’re

little doesn’t mean they can’t be saved. It does take a little more effort, but it’s not rocket science. Otherwise, they don’t have a chance.”

PROVIDING A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

Socializing kittens is another key care component because it reduces fear of the unknown and helps them adapt to different sounds, people, animals and situations—in short, develop confidence.

Nancy Peterson, board member for the National Kitten Coalition and the New York City nonprofit Neighborhood Cats, likes to stay with her kitten fosters while they eat so they associate her with delicious food (and to ensure each kitten gets her fair share).

Since they’re all individuals, she is mindful of their temperaments and lets them hide if they like. Instead of picking them up, she plays with a fishing pole toy

RED ALERT

What to Do if You Find a Kitten Outdoors

Some kittens who land in shelters shouldn’t be there. Well-meaning people find kittens outside and assume they are abandoned, but their mother might be hunting or hiding in the bushes and waiting for the human to leave, according to Tina Reddington Fried, senior director of Los Angeles Feline Programs for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

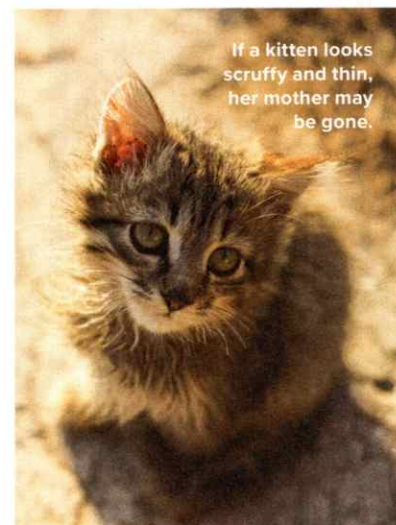
“No one can provide for kittens like their mom can, and we want to keep kittens with their mom whenever possible,” she says. To that end, the ASPCA has a free online tool with step-by-step instructions to assess the situation of kittens found outside (aspc.org/foundkittens).

“If they’re quiet, clean looking, kind of plump, warm—those are kittens that are probably getting great care from their mom,” she explains. “But if you see

kittens who are skinny, crying a lot, cold, dirty—those might be kittens who are truly orphaned and need us to intervene.”

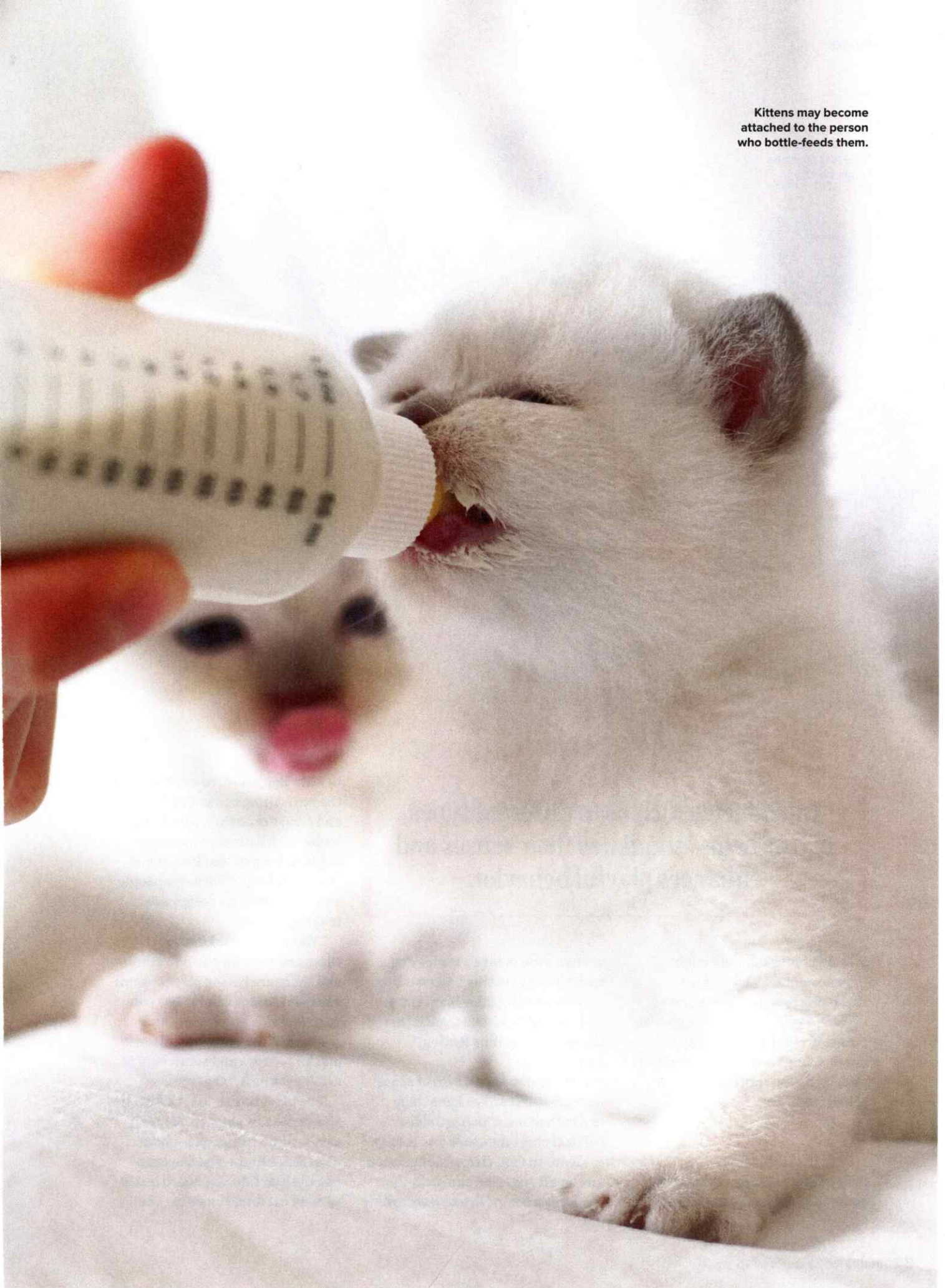
If you find a kitten in need, contact your local animal shelter to learn about support they can provide if you foster them.

“Please make sure to complete the full fostering journey by getting them spayed or neutered so that we can prevent more unwanted litters from being born,” Fried concludes. “Spaying and neutering is so important.”



If a kitten looks scruffy and thin, her mother may be gone.

Kittens may become attached to the person who bottle-feeds them.



Consider fostering kittens from the same litter all together: They just might be family for life.



Introducing kittens to different types of toys helps stimulates their senses and enhances playful behavior.

around her legs so they might initiate contact. Once they're fine being touched, touch their belly and pick them up just an inch off the ground and put them back down. (Humans should never pick up a cat by the scruff of the neck, she notes.)

WHEN THE WORLD RUSHES IN

When they're ready, friends can come to visit the kittens. One

woman even brings a senior dog who lets kittens crawl all over him.


"Overcoming their fear of you and having them trust you is just the most rewarding feeling," Peterson says.

Kittens don't need a lot of space; many foster families keep them in a bathroom, which provides vertical climbing space and is easy to clean. In fact, cleanable surfaces and small rugs that can go in the washing machine are key, according

to Kate Benjamin, co-author of the bestselling books *Catification* and *Catify to Satisfy*, which she wrote with Animal Planet star Jackson Galaxy, and founder of Hauspanther, which helps people and organizations design cat-friendly spaces.

"You want to make sure there are ways for them to climb, and there are hiding places—semi-enclosed spaces where they can go to feel safe and warm—and resources like water and litter, and lots of toys and scratchers of different kinds," she says.

The litter box should be kitten-sized with low sides so they can easily climb in and out—about 2–3 inches high—you can even use the low, flat cardboard boxes canned cat food comes in. The



Fostering kittens can help to teach your children empathy, responsibility and compassion.

Links for More Information

- **Best Friends Animal Society:**
bestfriends.org
- **ASPCA:**
aspca.org
- **National Kitten Coalition:**
kittencoalition.org
- **Neighborhood Cats:**
neighborhoodcats.org
- **Colorado Animal Rescue:**
coloradoanimalrescue.org
- **Hauspanther:**
hauspanther.com
- **Dumb Friends League:**
ddf.org
- **Meow Parlour:**
meowparlour.com

litter should be unscented and non-clumping because if a kitten eats litter, a clumping agent could prove dangerous. Keep the box in an accessible, quiet area—not next to a loud washing machine.

“Praise them when they use the litter box,” she says, adding, “Never use negative reinforcement with a cat for anything.”

Caring for foster kittens can be a wonderful experience for families with children, says Stephanie Hunt, shelter veterinary services and foster manager at Dumb Friends League, a 110-year-old animal shelter in Denver. The shelter offers a “Junior Foster Parent” program for kids ages 12 to 15, and she’s fostered kittens in her own home throughout her 14-year-old daughter Amelia’s entire life.

“I think it definitely helps with compassion, empathy and responsibility,” Hunt says. “It’s amazing,” she emphasizes.

The “League” offers free supplies, training and vet care to foster families to help them save more than 2,600 kittens and cats each year. Not every shelter can afford it, but friends and neighbors often donate to fosters thanks to social media requests on sites like Nextdoor.

Fostering kittens can be a terrific way to spend time with animals when you can’t commit to adopting a pet because of a demanding work schedule or frequent travel, according to Christina Ha, co-owner of Meow Parlour, New York’s first cat café, and its nonprofit arm, Meow Parlour Cats, which helps finances care for the café’s fosters and adoptable cats.

She personally fosters 50 to 60 bottle babies each year because she loves the life stage so much.

“It’s very apparent how much your work as a foster caregiver impacts them because you see how much changes in such a short period of time: their eyes open, their ears open, they start using the litter box, they become more confident,” she says. “It’s such a cool feeling.”

Ha records those changes on social media and is delighted when people who adopt her fosters reach out to share updates. She also enjoys connecting with Meow Parlour foster parents, who saved over 400 kittens and cats last year.

“In this world, sometimes it feels like there’s not enough good things happening,” she says. “Doing this, I get to meet a lot of good people.”

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