

Notes on weaning hand-rear kittens

People who ask for advice and support on handrearing often return a few weeks later asking how best to wean the kittens onto solids. Again, these notes come from my own experience of handrearing many orphaned foster kittens and other people may have different and equally effective approaches. The “right” way is any method which results in healthy, happy kittens which feed well and go on to lead lives as well socialised and, hopefully, well-behaved cats. There is however, a “wrong way”! - hand reared kittens can present some issues in adult life if care is not taken in regard to issues such as litter training and socialisation and some thought must be given to how best to deal with teaching kittens to be cats. Weaning hand-rears is therefore not just about teaching kittens to eat solids.

TOP TIP: *do not be afraid to start teaching kittens from a very young age. Watch queens with their babies – they tell them off, deny them access to the “milk bar” at times, and generally behave as a parent from the moment the kittens start to act independently. However much you adore your hand reared babies, do remember to set limits to behaviour as part of their learning curve – it may be as simple as refusing to allow them to climb your jean clad legs (a favourite trick) or a firm ‘no’ if they are climbing all over you, the important thing is that they learn they cannot always do exactly as they wish ... their feline mother would certainly have taught them! Putting them gently away from you with a firm “No!”, if behaviour is inappropriate, is the perfect start to rearing a healthy adult cat. You should not smack, as the kitten will only learn fear and aggression.*



At around 3 weeks old your babies will be starting to act much more independently with tremendous growth in their physical ability. They will begin to outpace the energy which can be provided by milk alone and need to be introduced to solids.

The precise age is a judgement call. I have had kittens who did not gain weight very well on milk substitutes and have weaned them as quickly as possible onto solid food. Others have been fat, happy and full of energy and with these I have delayed introducing solids until 4 weeks,

Common sense is the key ... active kittens will be hungry kittens.

FIRST INTRODUCTION TO FOOD

Kittens with a feline mother follow her about, and so are introduced to solid food on a copycat basis! Obviously that is not an option for hand-rears, so – having said that you should rely on your assessment of the kittens development to determine the “when” – the next question is “how”

STAGE 1

A key factor influencing how well kittens react to the introduction of solids, is your level of stress with the process. Kittens pick up on your feelings and what might have been a game can become an issue –all kittens get the idea in the end, so staying relaxed about it will help.

- Pick a time about an hour before you would normally be giving a milk feed. Avoid times when they will be ravenous, such as early morning.
- Choose a smooth paste food which mashes down to almost liquid consistency. I have used Hills A/D for years – it has a perfect consistency and is a nutrient rich product which gives minimal challenge to the digestion. Other manufacturers now make specific products for weaning – Royal Canin produce a Baby Mousse food which seems excellent.
- Do not plan to feed the kittens! You are only taste testing at this stage, and introducing the idea that this experience precedes milk.
- Take kittens on to your lap one at a time – using a towel to cover up with is recommended!

- Put a tiny amount of the food onto your little finger, letting it warm to body temperature, and gently put the tip of the finger to the side of the kittens mouth. Hand-rears should easily allow you to put the finger tip into the mouth and may well start sucking. If so – great! Keep topping up the tiny taste on your finger until the baby is bored with the game. If a kitten is adamant that it does not want any after the first taste – fine! This is not a battle – you have introduced flavour and that is sufficient.
- Feed the milk feed on schedule, and the subsequent feed should be given without trying solids
- You can then repeat the exercise

There are a couple of key points in this process:

- 1) If you smell of milk, kittens won't want to know about solids, so always try them without having milk in the room and before the milk is due.
- 2) There is no pressure or insistence, so the kittens do not associate solids with stress

Over 2 days, repeat the process three times a day, allowing kittens to take as much as they please from your finger. Even if they are taking substantial amounts, always allow them to finish with milk a short while after the solids.

Most kittens cotton on very quickly. Some will take longer – some will resist the idea of something solid in the mouth. They should be washing at this age so for kittens who are very resistant – wipe a little of the feed around the mouth and (for those washing themselves well) even a little on paws.

STAGE 2

This could not be simpler – just lower your “foody” finger closer and closer to the plate of food (still on your lap) until the kitten can barely distinguish whether it is sucking from you, or the plate. Push the food into a little mound towards the kittens mouth, to help, if necessary.

Occasionally, a kitten resists the change from finger food to plain food but this is just a case of ‘practice makes perfect’ ...

This is the time to change from lap feeding to floor feeding – same process of finger to plate, but then leave that kitten eating and start the next one on the process ... guiding it to eat from a different part of the plate.

TOP TIP: *use just one floor plate, to start with. Kitten feeding instinct is stimulated by the jostling that goes on.*

STAGE 3

Once you know that kittens are eating solids, it is time to stop the milk feed for that meal. Do make sure at this stage, that a shallow water bowl is always available and that you have introduced the kittens to it by using the finger taste method. Replace milk feeds gradually. Schedules need to fit individual circumstances, but as a guide line you should spend a couple of days taste testing and establishing actual feeding, then give solids only for the lunchtime feed for a couple of days. Gradually over the next week replace milk feeds with solid feeds until you are alternating the two, and then take the brave step of reducing milk to morning and night only.

IMPORTANT NOTES

If possible, continue to allow kittens to have at least one milk feed a day for as long as possible, as they do benefit greatly. Eight weeks is a minimum for me, and I usually continue with pedigree babies until 10 weeks. Without exception, they love the bedtime feed and it is always the last to go.

Do start to mix ordinary kitten food with the A/D as soon as they are eating properly, and slowly replace with it entirely, as they can be very difficult to wean off the baby food otherwise. Whiskas is good, and I also introduce chopped chicken, cooked fish,tuna etc.

Do watch for kittens who don't feed well in the jostle



at the plate, and wander away. Some kittens just don't like the melee and will do better if given one to one attention and a separate plate.

Do ensure that kittens are fully established on solids, and are weaned fully from milk and able to lap water, before homing.

One final point ... be very prepared for mess and lots of wash and brush up work. For some reason handrears usually 'swim' across plates of food in the early stages and emerge covered in A/D before charging off to wreck the furniture!

This three week old foster kitten doesn't think solids are hard!!

DRIED FOOD

I introduce dried foods sometimes before weaning starts and this is as a response to activity in the litter tray. For some reason kittens have a habit of mouthing litter (at least the granular varieties... I am not sure about shavings or paper!). As soon as I see them start, I put a little dish of **crushed** kitten dry food under their noses, and then a bowl down at all times. Any kitten seen attempting to chew litter has a tiny piece of dry food popped in instead. This process is far from a staged approach but always works and – oddly – most of my adult cats prefer dry food despite being weaned onto wet food!

LITTER TRAINING

I have mentored number of people raising handrears and this is the other subject they seem to become het up about. It is not stressful providing you start early. As soon as the kittens begin to stagger out of the nest, introduce a small flat tray to their space, with torn newspaper. Continue to stimulate the kittens to perform, as previously but once you start ... stand them in the tray as you stroke

with tissue and let the wee go onto the newspaper. Leave the first wee or two of each day in place as they are attracted to the smell.

As they get a little bigger, gently scratch with their paw on the paper. It is amazing how tiny kittens get the message and toddle to the tray

As they get a little bigger, start to add in sprinkles of your preferred brand of litter ...increasing amounts gradually until that is all they use.

... and don't forget to move up to a correctly sized kitten litter tray once their legs are long enough to climb in!

TOP TIP: *grow eyes in the back of your head for the first week or so of this training!! A kitten "going" anywhere other than the tray needs to be scooped up and popped in it. Wet bed or paper outside of the tray needs to be quickly removed or they will try to go again because the smell is there. Do not be cross if you see a kitten peeing in the wrong place ... just quietly scoop it into the tray, or it will associate the tray with you shoutingand the problem will worsen. Bad litter tray experiences can lead to lifelong problems so it pays to take great care at this stage.*

SOCIALISATION

If you have done the job well, with lots of TLC, your kittens will be highly socialised with people for life but this may not be enough to ensure they are happy cats.

Kittens need cats if

at all possible- to learn the way that cats behave. This is not so problematic with litters of several kittens as they interact among themselves, but for any small litters



– and for the added education of larger litters – do try to allow them to mix with your own adult cats if possible, once they are old enough to potter around and climb.

Obviously it is not sensible to take risks - I would never go out and leave hand rears with unrelated adults, unattended – but if you have relaxed girls or neuters and are there to supervise interactions, the benefits are considerable for the kittens' education.

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