



What to do when you find "orphaned" kittens

Thank you to **Community Cats Maryland** for this information.

Kitten season is in full force, and already the shelters are flooded with kittens of all ages. Many of these are “orphans” who are brought in without their mothers. These kittens may only be hours old, and require round-the-clock care and bottle feeding to survive... and sadly, many shelters do not have the resources or available foster families to be able to do this, and the kittens end up euthanized because there is no one to provide the care they need.

The best chance a kitten has for survival is staying with its mother. Before you scoop up a litter of “abandoned” kittens, please be SURE the kittens are actually abandoned. How do you tell? If you find a single kitten wandering on its own, you should rescue it immediately. It was probably abandoned by an unscrupulous human.

If you find a litter of kittens together in a nest:

- The mother cat may be out looking for food, or may have been scared off by your presence and is hiding very close by waiting for you to leave. She will be VERY upset if you take her kittens, thinking they are abandoned! (And sadly, your effort to “save” them might actually be a death sentence if the shelter you take them to doesn’t have a foster family available for them.)
- If the kittens aren’t in imminent danger, wait and observe them from a distance for an hour or two. You can put them in a little box with a soda bottle, or something similar, full of hot water if you’re worried about them being cold. A mother cat will NOT “reject” kittens that have been touched by humans.
- You can try scattering flour around the kittens and leaving the area completely for a while. Look for pawprints in the flour when you come back.
- Clean kittens who are sleeping soundly are probably not abandoned. Dirty, crying kittens are probably hungry and MAY have been abandoned and need rescue. (Although remember that as soon as kittens wake up, they start crying and want to eat! If you poke at them and they start to cry and crawl around, it doesn’t mean they’re starving... that’s just what they do when they wake up!)
- Kittens should only be removed from their nest if there is no evidence of a mother cat after several hours, or if the kittens seem to be in imminent danger or distress. If they truly are abandoned, they will need urgent care, including keeping them warm and feeding them kitten formula (NOT cow’s milk!). See the links at the bottom of this note for more information. If you are going to take them to a shelter or rescue, do your best to warm them up on the way.

If you do see a mother cat and the kittens seem to be healthy, the best thing is to keep the kittens with her. If the mother cat is friendly toward you, she and the kittens should be rescued together if possible. But if she is afraid of you and runs away, she might be feral (meaning she was born outside and has never been around humans), and should stay outside with her kittens. You should give her as much space as possible and not interfere with her. If the mother cat feels threatened by your presence, she will move the kittens elsewhere.

You can set up some sort of shelter nearby in the hopes that she might use it, and of course she will appreciate a steady source of food and water. Nursing mothers need lots of extra calories, so it's best to feed dry kitten food if possible, since it's more calorie-dense than adult cat food.

Kittens should stay with the mom until they are eating solid food, which is between 4-6 weeks of age. Up until about 8 weeks of age, feral kittens can be socialized and taught to be pets so they can be adopted into homes. But if a foster home cannot be found for them for this purpose, they can be spayed/neutered (along with their mom!) as part of a trap-neuter-release (TNR) program as soon as they weigh 2 lbs., which is about 8 weeks of age.

Shelters are always in dire need of foster parents for “bottle babies” – it’s a very unique and rewarding experience! If you can’t foster, consider donating some kitten milk replacer, which is very expensive and kittens need a LOT of it!