Introduction

Programs focused on saving kittens are not only a great asset to CCPs, they are among the most essential programs being used to save the lives of community cats and their offspring. From foster programs to kitten nurseries, all of them are focused on increasing lifesaving for this vulnerable population. This chapter gives an overview of one specific program and contains information that can be extracted and adapted based on your agency’s resources to create the best fit for your community.

The following information has been extracted and adapted from the *Best Friends Kitten Care Center Volunteer Manual*, developed for use at the Best Friends Lifesaving Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.

About the Best Friends Kitten Care Center

Best Friends Animal Society is working to increase the number of pets saved in Utah shelters each year. Newborn kittens are especially at risk of dying in shelters because they are too young to take care of themselves, they are weeks away from being eligible for adoption, and they are more likely to contract and transmit disease than other animals in shelters. Most shelters have difficulty finding and dedicating the resources necessary for caring for newborn kittens and the steady flow of feline newcomers throughout “kitten season” further exacerbates the problem. Fostering not only helps kittens find adoptive families, it saves their lives and greatly decreases the number of cats and kittens who do not survive in shelters.

The Best Friends Kitten Care Center in Salt Lake City is one of the many programs that Best Friends has developed to achieve this goal. The center provides lifesaving care to kittens coming into shelters across Utah. The center acts as both a fostering hub and a resource center where neonates are admitted, assessed by a veterinarian and sent to foster homes until they can eat on their own. The center initially was a kitten nursery providing around-the-clock care to newborn kittens; now, the main focus is kitten fostering and the goal is to not have a kitten stay overnight at the center unless it’s absolutely necessary.

Kittens at the center are eligible for foster care or transfer to one of our coalition partners at any time. If people are interested in fostering, they fill out a foster application online and attend a scheduled orientation and training session. In this session, care center staff go over the kitten foster care manual and answer any questions the new foster caregivers have about the program. To pick up kittens, the foster volunteers schedule an appointment with the foster coordinator, who assesses what age of kittens will work best with the foster volunteer’s lifestyle.

Care for foster kittens includes a strict feeding schedule, cleaning, and lots of snuggling and playtime. Foster caregivers are also asked to provide transportation to and from veterinary appointments as needed. When volunteers pick up their foster kittens, they receive a Kitten Foster Goal Sheet, which contains the dates that the kittens’ vaccines are due and any pertinent medical or behavioral information needed for that group of kittens. If the kittens need medication, care center staff show the volunteers how to administer it before they take the animals home.

We prefer 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.
Kittens are very susceptible to illness and can carry or catch dangerous ailments easily. For this reason, we require that foster caregivers isolate foster kittens with their own supplies for at least two weeks to try and ensure that the kittens are healthy before exposing them to any personal pets.

Once kittens weigh 700 grams (about 1.5 pounds) and if they have no ongoing medication or medical issues, they leave their foster homes to be spayed or neutered and given age-appropriate vaccinations. After the kittens’ surgeries, foster volunteers can either pick them up so they can recover at home for a few days or they can stay at the Best Friends Lifesaving Center for recovery and then be placed for adoption. Foster caregivers are also given a foster animal biography form to fill out so they can tell potential adopters about any special or fun personality traits that the kittens have or anything else that they think adopters would want to know about the kittens.

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. Please see the Q&A section in the appendix for more information on the kitten care center.

**Transitioning to a foster-based model**

Kitten nurseries are costly and require a lot of staff resources. For these reasons, many shelters are moving toward a community-supported solution, which involves greatly expanding the foster base by proactively encouraging community members to participate in fostering and save the lives of kittens. Through foster programs, shelters also increase their capacity, giving them more flexibility and allowing them to have more positive outcomes for kittens. For more information, see the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this chapter and Chapter 26, “Additional Cat Lifesaving Programs.”

**Caring for kittens in your facility**

With a foster-based model, most of the kittens who enter a shelter will ideally be sent out to foster homes before the end of their arrival day. However, it is important to have protocols and procedures in place for staff and volunteers for the times when the kittens are in the shelter’s care. This section describes in detail how to properly care for very young kittens.

**Keeping kittens warm.** It is crucial to keep the kittens’ living space warm, dry and draft-free. If a kitten feels cool or cold, warm him or her immediately (see instructions below). Never try to warm a kitten with your own body heat because your body temperature is much lower than that of a kitten, and the kitten’s body temperature could continue to fall. If a kitten’s body temperature falls too low, he can begin to fade and may not survive. Kittens also need to be warm to be able to eat.

When born, a kitten’s body temperature is 97 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature gradually increases and, by four weeks of age, normal body temperature is 99.5 to 101.5 degrees Fahrenheit. Kittens under three weeks of age cannot regulate their body temperature.

To keep kittens warm:

- Place a heated snuggle disc (a Snuggle Safe Pet Bed Microwave Heating Pad) wrapped in bedding in the kittens’ cage. Snuggle discs are heated for four to five minutes in the microwave, based on microwave wattage (see instructions on the microwave), and will stay warm for hours. Heat only when the discs are cold, since too much heating can cause them to deteriorate.

- Check the discs at each feeding to be sure they are still warm.
• Never place a kitten directly on an uncovered snuggle disc or heating pad.

• There should be space in the kennel where the kittens can move away from the disc if they’re too hot.

• Check the bedding at each feeding to make sure it is dry; change it if it’s wet. Wet or damp bedding can chill the kittens even if there’s a heat source in the kennel.

• If kittens are soiled, clean them gently, taking care to dry them with a towel thoroughly before returning them to their kennel.

• Before you begin feeding, check that the kitten is warm. Never feed a cold kitten. If a kitten feels cold despite being on a heat source, immediately work to warm the kitten up and alert a veterinarian.

• Don’t allow kittens to become chilled while feeding them. Make sure they stay on the heating pad while they’re out of the kennel.

• Food should be warm so that the kittens do not become chilled. Kittens cannot properly digest food when they are cold.

Weight management. Weight is an important indicator of a kitten’s development and health. Kittens weigh 90-100 grams (3 1/4 to 3 1/2 ounces) at birth and should gain approximately 10–15 grams (1/3 to 1/2 ounce) per day. They should double their birth weight by seven days and triple it by 21 days.

To track their growth, weigh them before and after every feeding with a small scale. It’s very important to keep accurate records of each kitten’s growth because weight loss of 10% or more of the kitten’s body weight is cause for alarm and a veterinarian should be alerted.

Exercise and socialization. Kittens need exercise to promote muscular, circulatory and mental development. They will really start to play and explore at about three to four weeks of age. As appropriate, provide toys and enrichment items in their kennel. These toys should be replaced regularly to avoid the spread of disease. Make sure that all the kittens get some hands-on socialization time on a regular basis.

To minimize the risk of infectious disease, different groups of kittens should not be mixed unless the veterinary team deems it appropriate. For example, in the Best Friends Kitten Care Center, healthy single kittens are mixed with other healthy single kittens for the purpose of socialization. Single kittens who are on medication may be mixed with kittens who have the same medical condition.

Please see the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this chapter for more information on general kitten care.

Feeding kittens

Feeding groups. Based on their age and size, kittens can be separated into groups for feeding. For example, in the Best Friends Kitten Care Center, kittens are divided into three groups:

• Bottle feeders (B). Kittens without erupted incisors who need to be bottle-fed formula are listed as B kittens. As a general guideline, B kittens who weigh under 200 grams (7 ounces) are bottle-fed every two hours throughout the day. B kittens weighing more than 200 grams are fed every four hours.

• Weaning (W). When kittens’ teeth erupt, they will begin to be weaned off the bottle and onto kitten food. As they wean, kittens are fed gruel (wet food and formula mixed together) four times per day. Initially, they may also get a bottle supplement as necessary. The focus at this time shifts from weight gain to kittens learning to eat on their own.
• Independent eaters (I). Once kittens can eat on their own, they are fed wet food three times a day and weighed at least once daily.

**Formula.** When mixing up kitten formula, you may need the following clean and sanitized items:

- Large stainless steel mixing bowl
- Whisk
- Funnel
- Strainer
- Measuring cup
- Water
- Powder formula
- Formula storage container

Because formula only lasts for 24 hours (refrigerated) once mixed, it is important to make only as much as you will need so that it doesn’t go to waste. Once you have chosen how much you will need, measure out one part powder formula and two parts water. Whisk thoroughly in the mixing bowl, then pour through the strainer and the funnel into the storage container. Label the formula with the date and time you mixed it and then refrigerate.

**Bottle-feeding basics.** Be sure to wash your hands or use hand sanitizer between litters and always wear clean gloves when feeding. When you are feeding a kitten, follow this sequence of steps: stimulate, weigh, feed, weigh, stimulate. Remember to place the kitten on his stomach on a puppy pad covering the heating pad. Never hold kittens on their backs or in the air when they are drinking from the bottle, as this could cause them to choke or aspirate. Aspiration occurs when kittens accidentally suck formula into the lungs, and you will see milk coming out of the nose. If this happens, hold the kitten upside down until he stops choking and immediately alert the veterinary staff.

Feeding reference charts should be located at each feeding station to offer guidance on approximately how much weight kittens should gain with every feeding, relative to their size. They may not gain this amount with each feeding, and that is acceptable. What is most important is that they are gaining weight overall, and that they are near their weekly milestone weights.

Keep in mind that some kittens don’t take easily to bottle-feeding. Kittens rely on scent and instinct — and a mother — to guide them to feed properly. Always try to let the kitten eat from a bottle first. If a kitten is not eating a sufficient amount from the bottle, or is not eating at all, then supplementing with syringe-feeding may be appropriate.

**Syringe-feeding.** Bottle-feeding is a very foreign thing to most kittens. The bottle does not look, smell or taste like their mother, so it can take several feedings for a kitten to get used to the bottle. In these situations, or if a kitten does not seem to be eating or gaining weight appropriately, syringe-feeding is an acceptable process.

**Weaning.** At three to four weeks, a kitten’s teeth will begin to break through the skin. Around this time, kittens may start to bite the nipple. They may seem hungry yet not want to suckle, and they will have a
greatly increased appetite. These signs usually mean that they are ready to be weaned and to begin eating on their own. We recommend weaning the kittens as soon as they are ready.

Weaning kittens are fed a gruel made from wet kitten food and formula. For the first few days of weaning, their diets can be supplemented with a bottle. It is very important that all weaning kittens have access to fresh food and water in their kennels. This gives the kittens the chance to learn about solid food and water at the appropriate age. You can also introduce kittens to litter and litter boxes at this time.

**Independent (weaned) kittens.** At around five to six weeks of age, kittens will be eating on their own. Weaned kittens should always have dry food and water available. They can be fed wet food three to four times daily. It is still important to monitor the kittens' weight and health. At this age, they are able to use the litter box independently. They are much more active and sometimes make their kennel very messy in between feedings. When caring for these kittens, your focus should be on cleaning and socializing, since they will eat throughout the day without your help.

**Stimulation for urination and defecation.** Mother cats groom their kittens to stimulate urination and defecation on a regular basis. In the absence of their mothers, it becomes our responsibility. Kittens under three weeks of age won’t be able to urinate and defecate on their own, so this is a crucial job.

Before and after each feeding, gently rub the kitten on or near the genitals and rectum with a baby wipe or soft paper towel. Make sure you rub only enough to get the kitten to eliminate because overstimulation will irritate the area. Keep an eye out for chafing and lingering dirt and do not let the kitten get chilled. Some additional information:

- Kittens need to be stimulated until they’re about three to four weeks of age.
- Kittens should be stimulated before and after each feeding.
- Kittens should urinate every time and defecate at least once daily.
- Record the kitten’s elimination on the daily care sheet, noting anything abnormal.
- If a kitten has diarrhea, make a note in the medical log and alert the veterinary staff.
- If a kitten has not defecated within the last 24 hours, please note this in the medical log.

A kitten’s urine and feces are helpful indicators of health. Look at their urine and feces to make sure they appear normal. The urine should be pale yellow or clear. Normal stools for bottle babies will be yellowish and the consistency of toothpaste. The stool of weaning kittens and independent eaters should be pale to dark brown and partially formed. Note anything abnormal on the daily care sheet and in the medical log. If you see bloody stool, please alert the veterinary staff immediately.

**Suckling.** It is natural for kittens to suckle on each other or on your fingers, even after they’ve finished eating. This kind of activity, however, can cause irritation to the other kittens’ fur, skin and genitals. It is a good idea to regularly check each kitten’s genitals to ensure that the suckling activity is not causing problems such as swelling and redness. If this occurs, please alert the veterinary staff right away.

See the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this chapter for more information on feeding kittens.

**Medical issues**

Newborn kittens do not have fully developed immune systems, so they are susceptible to many illnesses and parasites, some of which they get from their mothers at birth. Kittens need proper care and attention to ensure that they grow up to be happy, healthy cats.
We recommend keeping a medical log for reporting symptoms of illness. It’s important to be as specific as possible when describing symptoms. The following symptoms can be noted in the medical log:

- Sneezing
- Nasal discharge (note what color)
- Eye discharge (note what color)
- Coughing
- Diarrhea
- Straining to urinate or defecate
- Loss or decrease of appetite
- Weight plateau or weight loss over three or more feedings
- Behavior that is unusual compared to the normal behaviors of litter mates
- Vomiting (note consistency and color if possible)
- Constipation for 24 hours

Alert the veterinary staff immediately if you notice any of these symptoms:

- Aspiration (milk coming out of a kitten’s nose during feeding)
- Wheezing or difficulty breathing
- Bleeding from any part of the body
- Abnormal twitches
- Walking in circles or appearing disoriented
- Loss or decrease of appetite for more than two consecutive feedings
- Change in attitude or behavior
- Lethargy
- Unable to sit or stand up
- Blue color in the nose or pads of the feet
- Excessive vomiting (note consistency and color if possible)
- Weight loss of 10% or more
- Bloody diarrhea
- Low temperature (cool to the touch)

Common illnesses in kittens

The following information is intended to help those caring for kittens better understand and recognize some of the more common illnesses in cats. Any of these illnesses can cause a loss in appetite.

**Upper respiratory infection (URI).** The acronym URI is used to refer to any illness that affects a cat’s upper respiratory system; it is basically a kitty cold. These colds are very common in cats at shelters and kittens born outdoors.

URIs are frequently caused by herpesvirus or calicivirus. It is generally difficult to determine which virus the cat has, since they often have similar symptoms. Extra care is necessary when feeding these animals.

Signs and symptoms: Runny nose and/or eyes, sneezing, thick mucosal discharge, fever and loss of appetite. Herpesvirus may cause ocular ulcers. Calicivirus may cause painful joints, limping and oral ulcerations. Rare strains of calicivirus may cause more serious disease (or even be fatal for some kittens) but most commonly kittens show signs of typical URI with oral ulcers and/or limping.
Treatment: Medication and supportive care.

Transmission: URIs are very contagious to other cats and kittens through direct contact, and can also be transmitted via objects (called fomites) like bottles or bedding. Volunteers should be especially diligent about sanitation protocols when tending to sick kittens and should wash their hands after handling kittens with URIs. The viruses that cause URI can persist for extended periods of time in the environment, so appropriate disinfection is necessary.

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**Conjunctivitis.** Eye infections, also known as conjunctivitis, are quite common in kittens. Sometimes a URI can move into the kitten’s eyes (often due to herpesvirus), and these kittens may have eye ailments. In most cases, conjunctivitis is easily treated with eye medication. If you notice eye discharge and the kitten is not currently being treated for any eye issues, alert the veterinary staff for further evaluation and treatment.

Signs and symptoms: Watery eyes; white, yellow or green discharge. Black crust can be dried blood. The eyelids and third eyelid may be red, swollen and raised.

Treatment: Veterinary care, including eye ointment or drops, antibiotics and supportive care.

Transmission: Very contagious to other cats through direct contact via bowls, bottles, hands.

**Dehydration.** Just as with people, kittens must be properly hydrated to be healthy. When a kitten is not getting enough water, is vomiting, or has diarrhea or another illness, he can become dehydrated. If you believe a kitten is dehydrated, alert the veterinary staff for further evaluation.

Signs and symptoms: Dark yellow urine, decreased skin elasticity, constipation.

Treatment: Subcutaneous fluids (fluids injected under the skin) will be administered by the staff.

Transmission: Not contagious, but may be a warning sign of something more serious.

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**Diarrhea.** Because it can rapidly dehydrate a kitten, diarrhea can be a life-threatening situation. Diarrhea is caused by a wide variety of factors, including stress, diet, parasites, illness and infection. Be sure to alert the veterinary staff when you observe any abnormal feces, so that the kitten can be evaluated and treated quickly.

Signs and symptoms: Can range from liquid stool without form to explosive drips. May also include mucous or blood.

Treatment: Various medications, depending on the cause and severity, as well as supportive care.

Transmission: Can be highly contagious, depending on the cause. Handle with caution, since diarrhea can be indicative of a more serious illness.

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**Panleukopenia.** Panleukopenia is a viral infection that most commonly affects kittens and young cats. You may hear this disease referred to as “parvo.” This is because the panleukopenia virus is a type of parvovirus and is in the same family of viruses as canine parvovirus. A veterinarian can perform a test for the presence of the parvovirus when she suspects infection.

Signs and symptoms: Sudden onset of fever, high fever, vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, weight loss, lethargy, sudden death. Once a kitten has been infected, symptoms can take 3–14 days to present.

Treatment: Antibiotics and supportive care. Once panleukopenia is suspected or confirmed, the kittens are put into isolation for treatment.
Transmission: Easily transmitted through direct contact with saliva, vomit and feces. Left untreated, it is almost always fatal. Because the virus is difficult to kill and can survive in the environment for up to a year, extreme diligence is required in contamination control. Unvaccinated cats can become infected with panleukopenia simply by coming into contact with places where an infected cat has been. When a kitten is diagnosed with panleukopenia, or even suspected of having panleukopenia, the entire area must be decontaminated.

It is critical that all sanitation protocols are followed when tending to the kittens in your care so that the possibility of transmitting this disease is lessened. Staff and volunteers are strongly advised to have their personal pets vaccinated to prevent transmission of this deadly disease into their households.

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV). FeLV is a viral infection that affects a cat’s immune system and bone marrow.

Signs and symptoms: There are a variety of symptoms, including a suppressed immune system. Diagnosis is made only through blood testing.

Treatment: There is no cure for FeLV, so most treatment of FeLV-positive cats involves supportive care. Because FeLV-positive cats have weaker immune systems, they need to be treated for upper respiratory infections more often than FeLV-negative cats. FeLV has a low prevalence in cat populations (usually around 3%). With such a low prevalence, the chances are high that a positive test result might be a false positive. While it was common practice at one time for shelters to routinely test every cat for FeLV, that practice is in decline. Many shelters have chosen instead to advise adopters that testing is best performed and results interpreted by a private-practice veterinarian.

Transmission: The virus is typically spread from infected cats to non-infected cats through close personal contact, usually involving saliva. It can be spread by grooming, shared food bowls, bites and other forms of close contact. It can also be transmitted from a mother cat to a kitten in utero and from the milk of an infected cat. Some less common but possible causes of transmission include fleas, blood transfusions or contaminated needles. FeLV is typically not spread through waste.

The virus does not live long outside of a cat host, so spreading FeLV via human clothing and hands is very unlikely. If an FeLV-positive cat is housed in a separate room from an FeLV-negative cat, it is unlikely that transmission will occur. To be on the safe side, food and water bowls should not be shared. If FeLV is present, it should be noted on the litter's kennel.

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). FIV is a virus that can cause a multitude of health problems in cats due to reduced immune system function.

Signs and symptoms: There’s a variety of symptoms, including a suppressed immune system. Diagnosis is made only through blood testing.

Treatment: Supportive care.

Transmission: People cannot get FIV from cats, but it is contagious to other cats and is most commonly spread through deep bite wounds. Less commonly, FIV is transmitted by an infected mother cat during birth.
or through sexual contact. Most cats with FIV live a normal life despite the virus and they can live well with other cats if there is no aggressive fighting. It is worth noting that spaying or neutering cats greatly minimizes the risk of transmission. Cats living indoors in a stable social structure have little chance of passing the disease to other cats in the household. If FIV is present, it should be noted on the litter’s kennel.

Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP). FIP is a syndrome that may occur after a cat is infected with the coronavirus. If not cleared by a competent immune system, this virus can mutate within the cat’s body. Once mutated, it provokes an immune response causing severe and progressive inflammation of organs and tissues. There are two types of FIP — wet and dry — though most infections present along a spectrum between the two.

Signs and symptoms: Fever, lethargy, loss of appetite, unresponsive to antibiotics. The wet form includes a large fluid-filled belly or fluid in the chest.

Treatment: There is no readily available, effective treatment for FIP, but we can treat symptoms to slow the progress until the kitten no longer exhibits an acceptable quality of life.

Transmission: FIP itself is not transmittable, but the coronavirus is, via stool and saliva. Once a kitten has contracted the coronavirus, the virus may or may not mutate into FIP. It can often look like fading kitten syndrome (see below).

Ringworm. Not an actual worm, ringworm is a fungal infection affecting the skin, hair, and occasionally the nails of animals and people. It is in the same family as athlete’s foot, and is not a life-threatening condition. In fact, it does not affect the general health of animals or people. Three species of ringworm fungus most commonly affect cats and dogs. The species that affect cats and dogs can be passed between these two species as well as to humans and other species.

Signs and symptoms: Hair loss, most commonly on the face, ears and paws. Irritated, scaly skin.

Treatment: Treatment options include isolation, lime sulfur dips, topical antifungal creams and oral medications. When kittens and cats in your care have ringworm, we recommend that they be moved into medical isolation.

Transmission: Ringworm can be spread readily on grooming implements, contaminated toys and bedding, or by humans on their clothing and hands. It can be found on the hair of animals from a contaminated environment, even when the animal himself is not showing any signs of infection. Ringworm is very durable in the environment and, if left untreated, can persist for months in objects like carriers, furniture, carpets and dust. And it can infect animals housed in this contaminated environment. In nature, the incubation period for ringworm is between four days and four weeks. Close contact with the infected animal or his bedding is usually required for transmission.

Common parasites in kittens

Ear mites. Ear mites are tiny parasites that live in the ear canal. If you see a dark brown discharge that looks like dirt or coffee grounds in a kitten’s ears, it is probably ear mites. Ear mites can be passed from one kitten to another, but transmission usually requires direct contact.

If you see dirt in a kitten’s ears, please have the kitten checked by the veterinary staff so he can be evaluated and treated. Do not clean the kitten’s ears without first checking with the staff. A kitten’s ear canal can be easily damaged by the improper use of cotton swabs.

Roundworms, tapeworms and hookworms. Worms affect a cat’s digestive system and are very common in kittens. You can sometimes see worms in or around a kitten’s rectum; you may see a long worm or what looks like rice protruding from her anus. Indications of worms are a large belly, diarrhea and an inability to gain weight. If you see signs of worms, alert a veterinarian and begin treatment. Various
medications can easily take care of the problem. All kittens over two weeks of age are regularly treated with dewormer.

**Coccidia and giardia.** Coccidia and giardia are very common protozoa that can invade a kitten’s digestive system and cause diarrhea. These parasites are contagious and can be spread through feces, but they are easily treated with oral medications. Remember to always wear gloves when cleaning up or handling feces.

**Fading kitten syndrome**

Fading kitten syndrome is a life-threatening emergency in which a kitten, sometimes one who was previously healthy, “crashes” and begins to fade. If not dealt with immediately, this situation can result in death. There is no clear cause or reason for this condition, though it has been linked to birth defects, environmental stress and infectious diseases. Early detection and treatment are imperative; sadly, though, many of these kittens will still die.

Symptoms of fading kitten syndrome include:
- Low body temperature: The kitten feels cool or cold to the touch.
- Extreme lethargy: The kitten appears unable to get up or stand, is not responding to touch, and can’t hold his head up.
- Trouble breathing: The kitten is gasping for breath or exhibiting open-mouth breathing.
- Meowing: The kitten is crying out.

When a kitten is fading, two things are happening: hypothermia (being too cold) and hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). The kitten’s body temperature and blood sugar level must be raised immediately. If you suspect a kitten is beginning to fade, get the kitten on a heated pad and alert the veterinary staff immediately. Please understand that even with our best efforts, some of these kittens still won’t make it.

**Deceased kittens**

It is never easy to lose a kitten, and it affects each of us differently and personally. It’s important for staff and volunteers to understand that we are operating against nature much of the time, because these kittens are not with their moms.

In the Best Friends Kitten Care Center, we focus on the positive outcomes of the work we do, but we do not pretend that we can save every kitten we rescue. Of course, every kitten we take in is worth all of the effort and care we have to give. If a kitten passes while in your care, please notify the staff immediately.

**Sanitation**

Because of the fragile nature of kittens, it’s important to have many sanitation procedures in place to protect their health. For example, to minimize the spread of disease in the kitten care center, each room in the center has separate brooms, dustpans, mops, food containers, litter containers, disinfectant spray bottles and handbooks. These items are marked with the color corresponding to the room in which they belong. Items must always stay in the correct rooms, except for things that need to be refilled and/or washed in the kitchen.

As we’ve mentioned, newborn kittens do not have fully developed immune systems, so they are susceptible to many illnesses and parasites, some of which they get from their mothers at birth. Many of the kittens in our care are too young to be vaccinated, which means they are especially vulnerable to dangerous viruses.
One of the major challenges of caring for kittens is preventing the spread of disease. Because many animals pass through and reside in an animal care facility, a high risk of cross-contamination and pathogen transmission exists. Kittens may enter the facility in poor health, potentially introducing diseases to the environment and risking infection to other kittens. Some kittens will appear healthy but may be shedding various harmful germs. With all of this disease around and so many opportunities for transmission, it is critical to remain diligent in following proper sanitation processes.

A pathogen, or germ, is any disease-producing agent, especially a virus, bacterium or other microorganism. Germs are spread by contact with an infected animal or by fomites. A fomite is any object or substance capable of carrying infectious organisms from one individual or another. Pathogens are spread by hands, on fur, on paws and feet, and via doorknobs, clothing, carriers, tables, pens, clipboards and kennels. Anytime a dirty surface contacts another surface, the germ is spread. People’s hands and the clothes we wear are the most common fomites.

Carefully following sanitation protocols and procedures helps to prevent the spread of germs from one kitten to another, from one room to another, and from one environment to another.

To correctly clean a surface, organic material, including food and fecal matter, must be removed with soap or detergent prior to disinfection. Items that are not properly cleaned cannot be disinfected. In the kitten care center, we use a product called Rescue to disinfect. Rescue (accelerated hydrogen peroxide technology) is extremely effective at killing viruses, bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms. It has a short contact time and only needs to sit on a surface for five minutes to kill germs.

Hand-washing is the most important and effective procedure to prevent the spread of disease. Some hand-washing protocols:

- At the beginning of each shift, wash your hands with soap and warm water for 30 seconds.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer between litters. Be aware that hand sanitizer does not kill panleukopenia or ringworm.
- If you come into direct contact with feces, urine or vomit, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for 30 seconds.

We recommend the use of barrier protections such as shoe covers, gowns and gloves. Please keep in mind:

- Always wear clean gloves and isolation gowns when handling kittens. When you’re finished with feeding and cleaning a kennel of kittens, throw away the soiled gown and gloves.
- You do not need to change gloves or gowns between kittens if they’re from the same kennel.
- Avoid handling kittens and anything in their kennel that may be contaminated, and then handling clean supplies or food.
- Never handle clean supplies or food while wearing dirty gloves. After handling kittens and their kennels, remove your gloves before handling clean supplies.
Additional resources

- Alley Cat Allies’ Kitten Progression: At-a-Glance
- Best Friends Kitten Foster Manual
- Foster Programs Training Playbook
- Caring for Abandoned Kittens
- Bottle-Feeding Kittens
- How to Determine the Age of Newborn Kittens: English
- How to Determine the Age of Newborn Kittens: Spanish
- Weaning Kitten Care: Four to Eight Weeks Old
- Kitten Pocket Reference Brochure
APPENDIX

Frequently asked questions about the Best Friends Kitten Care Center

Q: How many kittens does the kitten care center save?
A: In 2019, our total intake was 1,556 (1,327 kittens, 229 adults and nursing moms). We had a save rate of 89%.

Q: Where do all these kittens come from?
A: We accept kittens from shelters across the state of Utah.

Q: How do the kittens end up as orphans?
A: Most of the time, we don’t know the specifics of how a shelter obtained the kittens. The mom could have been off searching for food when the kittens were found; the mom could have been injured or died. There are many possible scenarios that could result in the shelters getting kittens.

Q: My friend found a litter of kittens. Can she stop by and drop them off?
A: Best Friends is not able to accept kittens from the public. The best thing to do for most kittens is to leave them with their mother and then contact your local shelter for trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) resources when they are over eight weeks old. Taking newborn kittens to your local shelter should be a last resort. Most animal shelters are unable to provide the around-the-clock care that kittens need. In fact, at many shelters, young kittens are at risk of being euthanized within a few hours of arriving.

Q: Does the kitten care center ever close?
A: It used to close during winter months, but starting in 2019, it stayed open even during the winter to accept adult cat intakes, operate as a fostering hub and take any kittens that shelters called us about.

Q: Are kittens in the center healthy?
A: Many of the kittens we take in are sick and sometimes injured. Most of these kittens have been found out in the elements, exposed to every type of parasite and contagion imaginable. They are also exposed to predators and other means of injury that house cats aren’t exposed to. These young kittens do not have fully developed immune systems or fully developed digestive systems, so they commonly bring illness with them. They are evaluated at intake and treated for any known illnesses or injuries at that time.

Q: Why is it so important to keep kittens warm?
A: Very young kittens cannot regulate their body temperature. If a kitten becomes chilled to the point that his body temperature drops, it can cause the kitten to fade. The kitten can die if steps are not taken to prevent this temperature drop and warm the body.

Q: Will my pets at home be safe from contracting any illness that’s in the center?
A: If your pets are current on all vaccinations and you adhere to sanitation protocols, your pets should be safe from contracting the illnesses with which you come into contact in the center. Be aware, however, that your pets could contract an illness if their own health is compromised in some way or if they are not vaccinated. The chances of infection also increase if you don’t follow all sanitation protocols.

Q: Can I bring my pets or foster pets to the center with me?
A: Because of the possibility of spreading contagion to the cats and kittens in the center, you cannot bring any personal pets or foster animals into the center at any time.
Q: Can groups of kittens be mixed together for socializing?
A: To minimize the risk of infectious disease, different groups of kittens should not be mixed together unless the veterinary team deems it appropriate. A healthy single kitten can be mixed with another healthy single kitten of similar size for the purpose of socialization.

Q: What should I wear when volunteering at the center?
A: Wear comfortable clothing, preferably in layers. The rooms can get very warm, and you will be wearing a gown over your clothing for long periods of time. We ask that you wear closed-toe shoes for safety.

Q: I've noticed that bottle babies and “weaners” seem to always be in the top row of kennels. Why is that?
A: We only move kittens to the bottom row of kennels after they have been vaccinated. Because the bottom row of kennels is considered “downstream” due to potential food, water, urine and feces contamination coming from the kennels above, we want the kittens there to have some protection via vaccine.

Q: How do you determine when you will vaccinate a kitten for the first time?
A: We pay close attention to when a kitten’s canine teeth fully erupt (around four weeks old). When this happens, we take the opportunity to vaccinate the kitten, since this is the only chance of protection against panleukopenia.

Q: I saw a really disgusting long worm in a kitten’s litter box. Do you need to deworm him?
A: Actually, seeing that worm is a good thing (it’s usually a roundworm), because it means we did deworm him, and the dewormer is working. But with that said, please let us know about anything like this; we like to be aware. Specifically, let us know if you see what looks like rice in the litter box (they’re usually tapeworm segments), as we will need to use a different kind of dewormer in that instance. We administer dewormers to kittens starting at approximately two weeks of age, and then give another dose every two weeks until they reach two months old.

Q: One of the kittens I’m working with hasn’t pooped in 15 hours. What should I do?
A: We expect kittens to defecate about every 24 hours. If a kitten hasn’t pooped in 24 hours, alert a veterinarian and he or she will determine if an enema or other treatment is needed.

Q: When I stimulated a kitten who came in earlier today, I noticed that her stool was green. Should I note that in the medical log?
A: It is pretty normal for a kitten who has been with us for only a short period of time to have green poop. She’s just digesting what she was eating before she arrived at the center. If the kitten has been with us longer than a few days and you see green poop, however, it is important to note this in the medical log.

Q: Isn’t all of this contamination stuff overkill? How can cute little kittens possibly have anything wrong with them?
A: Kittens are actually one of the most high-risk animals for contracting several infectious diseases, so our contamination protocols are in place for a very good reason. You’d be surprised by how easy it is to spread infection, so we have to be really vigilant.

Q: Why can’t I cuddle with the little bottle babies?
A: These babies are very vulnerable, and need to come out to the table and immediately return to their kennels to sleep. They can lose a great deal of body heat while out at the table, and expend precious calories while they are moving around. Plus, kittens don’t start benefiting from cuddling and human affection until they’re about three to four weeks old.
Q: I’m really upset that a kitten I took care of last week passed away today. Should I continue to volunteer?

A: Sadly, the reality of this work is that some kittens won’t make it. All of us — staff, volunteers and interns — do the best we can. We also accept that sometimes it wasn’t meant to be for a particular kitten. As far as continuing to volunteer goes, that is a decision you have to make for yourself, but we believe that you do make a difference in all of the lives that you touch at the center. We hope you’ll join us in continuing to focus on those lives we save every day.

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Job description: Volunteer kitten care center assistant

Volunteer assistants in the kitten care center have two job functions:

• Feed and provide basic care to orphaned kittens ranging in age from birth to eight weeks
• Help maintain sanitation in the center according to established protocols

The volunteers provide humane care for the kittens in the center and help keep the environment clean, healthy and safe for the kittens and cats there. In addition, assistants must follow established policies and procedures at all times and must be able to work calmly and efficiently when the center is at full capacity. Volunteers are responsible for the following tasks and other duties as assigned:

• Feed kittens according to feeding procedures and sanitation protocols.
• Make accurate notes on kittens’ daily care sheets and the feeding board.
• Alert the staff about any health issues needing attention.
• Clean kittens’ cages (including, but not limited to, litter boxes) thoroughly and according to protocols.
• Maintain sanitation in the center according to established protocols.
• Empty trash and recycling containers as needed.
• Wash dishes and do laundry as needed.

Volunteer assistants must be able to:

• Lift and carry at least 10 pounds
• Bend and stoop to tend to kittens in the lower cages
• Be emotionally prepared to care for fading kittens and those who pass away
• Work well with others
• Follow the established chain-of-command to solve problems when they arise

For safety purposes, the dress code when volunteering at the kitten care center is as follows:

• Volunteers must wear closed-toe shoes.
• Long hair must be pulled back to prevent cross-contamination when handling kittens.
• Please don’t wear any dangling jewelry.