

3100 Cherry Hill Road ● Ann Arbor, MI 48105

734-662-5585 ● www.hshv.org

 **Working with Fearful Kittens**

**What Do Fearful Kittens Need?**

1. Patient caregivers with time to work with them daily. This “work” will involve lots of gentle handling and play with interactive toys. You don’t have to be home all day, but the kitten does need focused attention when you are home. Routine and consistency do wonders.
2. A small safe place at first. This can be a small quiet room or a bathroom. This will help your kitty adjust to you and her new home gradually. A larger space will be overwhelming for her, and she will find spaces to hide that may not be easy to access. So help her out and give her a little safe place to hide. When she’s used to you, you can gradually increase her living space.
3. A relatively quiet home with a regular routine will be easier to adjust to for a fearful kitten. A household with multiple people, especially if it includes transitory people as do many roommate situations, could be more difficult for this type of kitten.

**Tips on Socializing Fearful Kittens:**

1. Select a quiet room and set up a large pet carrier with a litter box, food and water bowls and comfortable bedding in which to confine the kittens. Arrange the litter box and bowls so they are within easy reach for cleaning and refilling. You can also utilize a small bathroom as a space for fearful kittens. You don’t want to chase the kitty all over the room, and reaching under a bed can be hard, so make sure the only “hiding places” available to the kitten are ones that you can reach into easily. Cardboard boxes work really well for this, as do small cat carriers. If possible, have a radio or TV playing in the room, this can acclimate her to “normal” noise and work as white noise to block out any scary sounds coming from other places in the house. Hiding is a coping mechanism for cats and it’s important to provide your fearful kitten with safe hiding spaces.
2. Move slowly and talk softly when approaching the kitten. Get down closer to her level when possible. Don’t force her to interact if she’s not ready. Work with toys and wet food well before you try to pet her or pick her up. Spend time in the room, just talking to her or reading to her so that she can get used to you being there.
3. Use food to make friends! Make sure you feed at set times, so she associates you with food. It may help at first to have just one or two people do this, so the kitten can bond strongly with core caregivers. Try using wet food or treats to tempt the kitten close to you. Feed them the food off of a spoon or tongue depressor but don’t try to pet them until they’re reliably staying close to you during feedings.
4. Use toys to build confidence, for exercise, and as a fun way to bond. Playing with a kitten with a wand toy is a great way to bring them close to you without pressuring them to interact or be petted. The best toys are the interactive kind, like feather wand toys and cat-dancers. Make sure there are plenty of toys out for the kitten to play with on their own, as well. If the kitten stays close after a play session, reward her with treats or wet food and pet gently as much as she’ll allow. If the kitten is fearful of the toys, try them again later on, when she might be more confident and ready to play.
5. Handle the kitty with care. Once she’s coming into your space reliably, you can pet her more and more but allow her to retreat as needed. Tempt her back with food or toys and try to pet some more. When she’s ready, wrap her in a towel and pick her up gently, hold/cradle her while she relaxes in your arms. If she struggles to get away, let her go and try again at another time. As she grows more comfortable with you, get her used to being petted all over.
6. Gradually introduce the kitten to the rest of the home under your supervision after she’s grown to trust you and is realiably seeking attention. One new room at a time is best. If she’s overwhelmed, put her back in her “safe” room.
7. Gradually introduce her to new people, using the same slow and steady methods that you’ve used with her. Make sure not to traumatize her by putting her in a situation that is beyond her capacity, it can be overwhelming to meet too many people at once.
8. Make the carrier a nice place! Whatever carrier you choose, keep it out and let the kitty get used to going in of her own accord. Cardboard carriers can be laid on their side with a little towel to lie on placed inside. You can put little bits of dry food in there as well treats. You could also feed wet food meals in the carrier to make it a familiar and safe place. This will make necessary trips and veterinarian visits easier on kitty.
9. As with any kitten, it is important not to allow or encourage play-biting. Do not wrestle with your kitten or use your fingers as toys. Cats should learn early on that hands are for petting, not biting. Fearful kittens can get very confused and potentially nippy if handled incorrectly. It’s also common for fearful kittens to play inappropriately because they haven’t learned how to play from littermates or mom. Use wand toys to encourage proper play, always keeping kitten active but away from hands and arms. Reward proper play and redirect with proper toys if kitten becomes overstimulated.
10. Socialization takes time. Give the kitten at least a few 20-minute “visits” a day or more if possible.