

Orphaned Kittens

Several times each year we are brought kittens that are too young to be away from their mother who are assumed to be abandoned or orphaned.

Kittens should stay with their mothers until they are at least 6 weeks old. You can tell if a kitten is younger than 6 weeks if its eyes are not open, if its eyes have a frosty/bluish tint, if its teeth are not developed, and/or if it is unable to walk/run with a steady gait. Kittens usually weigh at least 1 pound at 6 weeks so that can also be a way to tell. If you find a kitten that is able to run and jump and is steady on its feet you can safely assume that it is old enough to come in to the shelter without its mom. For the younger ones, however...

If you find very young kittens and think they have been abandoned by their mother, please be aware that mother cats will often leave their young for short periods of time to hunt but will usually return. While we do bottle-feed when necessary, for the health and survival of the kittens it is best to leave them with their mothers. Before removing the kittens, monitor the situation to be sure they are truly abandoned. If the kittens are warm, their fur is clean and soft, and they aren't skinny, their mother is close by. Check them again in 24 hours and don't be surprised if the mother has returned and moved them. If they are in a dangerous situation, please make every effort to bring the mother cat in with the kittens. [Contact us](#) for more information.

If you wish to attempt bottle-feeding orphaned kittens yourself, here is some important information...

- Milk is species specific. Cow milk is best for cows, goat milk is best for goats, and cat milk is best for cats. Feeding an orphaned kitten cow's milk is not sufficient and can actually cause more harm than good. Next to actual cat milk, cat specific milk replacement (formula) is the best thing to feed to orphaned kittens.
- Milk is more than just nutrients. Fresh milk also contains antibodies from the mother that protect the offspring until their own immune systems begin to develop. This is one of the reasons why keeping kittens with their mothers is ideal. When kittens have been orphaned it is important to remember that they are more susceptible to disease and must be kept isolated from other animals as much as possible.
- When you bottle-feed a kitten you have to act as its mother in more ways than just supplying milk. Very young kittens will often not defecate or urinate unless they are stimulated. When they are with their mother, she licks their bottoms until they relieve themselves – if you are bottle-feeding, you'll need to wipe the kittens' bottoms with a warm wet washcloth or cotton ball regularly (before and after feeding is best) to keep their internal systems moving. You will also need to keep the kittens warm and contained (so that they are safe from dangers such as other pets, falls, etc.)
- The younger a kitten is, the lower its chances of survival without its mother's milk. Every attempt should be made to keep a kitten with its own mother (or a nursing foster mother) for as long as possible.

Here at the River Bluff Humane Society we do attempt to bottle feed kittens when necessary and we have had many successes with bottle-fed kittens who grow to be healthy adults. Unfortunately we have had many more failures than successes. The younger a kitten is when it is taken from its mother, the lower its chances of survival. Again, please [contact us](#) for advice regarding your specific situation if you have found kittens in need.