

FORGOTTEN KITTEN PROJECT

Training Guide

Making a difference, one kitten at a time

By Sarah Rogers – Feral Bridge

Sarah@feralbridge.org

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Forgotten Kitten (FK) training 101. Thank you for joining the growing team of individuals dedicated to the belief that no kitten should be forgotten. This instructional outline should be combined with an in-person training by a Cat Town FK Trainer.

Most often, Forgotten Kittens describe cats of approximately 10 weeks to under one year old. These are feral or semi-feral cats that were caught past the age of ‘easy’ socialization (approximately 8 weeks and under). Most Forgotten Kittens you will train are roughly between 4 and 7 months old.

This training outlines four *states* in the socialization of Forgotten Kittens. The following sections will offer strategy suggestions on how best to socialize in each of these states. You may have your own strategies that you enjoy using or that you learn along the way. Share your ideas. Through collaboration our methods become stronger and results occur more quickly. (Note: the process of ‘wrapping’ a kitten for socialization has been omitted here; assuming that most kittens characterized as Forgotten Kittens will have passed the age at which this approach is realistic).

This training utilizes a “Reward for Response” approach – meaning for each positive response the kitten makes, it is rewarded. Socialization is literally the training of a feral or semi-feral animal to respond certain ways through training.

Kittens react with behaviors that are inconsistent with *adoptability*. These behaviors are, however, consistent with their prior environments and their ability to survive. Only through training will they learn that these “Negative Behaviors” (NB) are unnecessary and positive behaviors will produce positive results. Cats thrive on routine and consistency. Once they learn the positive behaviors necessary to become adoptable, this becomes their new ‘normal’.

It is very important that kittens be touched and that should occur soon after their arrival. Some kittens will need to be touched using a ‘Touch Tool’ (explained later). During certain stages, the kitten will react negatively to this touch, but it is paramount that touch be used during each socialization session. A good indicator of how far to ‘push’ them is: use ‘touch’ until two or three negative behaviors are shown (e.g., the kitten is no longer just hissing, it’s begun to hiss and bite at the tool). If two negative behaviors are shown, switch strategies and reintroduce ‘touch’ later in the session.

Personal safety is paramount. Kittens can be very unpredictable, because they haven’t yet developed the strategies of avoidance like an adult feral cat. As a result, sometimes feral kittens can charge straight at you (to get away) when startled or scared, rather than doing everything possible to avoid you. Stay attentive. Suggestions made throughout this training assume that it is safe to do what is being suggested. Never compromise safety – it is detrimental not only to you but also to the kitten.

Remember: If we put in the time and effort, we will see the results.

YOUR PHYSICAL PRESENCE IN THEIR SPACE

It is very important to think of how your physical and emotional presence affects the kittens you are training. Cats have twice as many scent receptors in their noses than humans. They have a more acute sense of smell than we do. They also have a scent organ in the roof of their mouths and you will often see cats open their mouths when sniffing your hand or another object. Cats are also very sensitive to noise. The average human is approximately 25 times larger than the kitten they are socializing. Imagine being in the presence of something 25 times larger than yourself. You would probably back away and do everything you could to make it go away, too, if you didn't understand what it wanted from you.

Some things to consider:

- Don't wear perfume.
- Wash your hands thoroughly before your visit. If you have a kitten particularly affected by smell, wash your hands again with a mixture of baking soda and salt. Use soaps that are unscented.
- Don't wear flashy, dangling or noisy jewelry.
- Take up as little physical space as possible in the room. Keep feet under you, kneel to their level, place unused arms in lap.
- Entering a room with your back toward the kitten and kneeling down with your back to them can often help put the kitten more at ease.
- Speak softly and gently.
- Move slowly – sometimes at a snail's pace to allow the kitten time to adjust to your movements. Better to take 5 minutes to inch a foot closer to the kitten than to move a foot immediately and have the kitten simply back farther away.
- Remember that arms and hands are threatening to a feral animal. In the wild, appendages of other animals usually come at another cat's body as a form of aggression, not a form of affection.
- Man-made toys are foreign objects. They can be frightening and initially seen as something to fear. Take time when introducing these items. Usually the tolerance stage is more appropriate for toy introduction.

MOTIVATORS

Each kitten is unique. Therefore motivators and progress will vary. Take time to get to know the cat you are working with by reading notes from other volunteers and building a relationship with the kitten you are socializing.

Without motivators, there really is no reason for a kitten to become socialized to humans. The vast majority of kittens (likely 80% to 90%) will relate to you through:

- Food
- Treats
- Play
- Physical attention

Document what works during your volunteer sessions so that others can continue using the same motivators. You will use these motivators constantly to reward positive behaviors.

If you have a kitten that shows no interest in any motivators (after several weeks of work), you will want to brainstorm with others on how to break through to this kitten. In these circumstances, pairing this type of kitten with a very socialized older cat will often give it the confidence it needs to make progress.

USE OF “TOUCH TOOLS”

The primary touch tool outlined in this training is the use of a metal telescoping back scratcher. The back scratcher closely mimics the touch of a human hand. The telescoping feature allows the back scratcher to be shortened over time eventually enabling you to incorporate the use of your hand. Because they are metal they can be washed and disinfected, and almost all scent can be removed.

The backscratcher should be introduced during the first session the kitten has with anyone (usually 24 hours after arrival), and incorporated into every volunteer’s training. You can help transfer your scent to the backscratcher by placing the device under your arm for 30 seconds. Slowly introduce the tool to the kitten by sliding it along the surface to the base of the kitten’s feet (lift slowly upward as necessary) until the kitten can sniff at the device. Expect that during the initial introduction of the backscratcher the kitten may aggressively swat, bite, and lunge at the device. **DO NOT REACT** – keep the backscratcher still and in a non-threatening position as low to the surface as possible. Immediately after the kitten is done attacking and is now still, slowly bring the device back and place a treat or wet food on it. Offer the kitten the wet food or treat using the backscratcher to deliver the treat. Repeat this delivery of treats by the backscratcher many times until there is very little to no reaction. Once the kitten has stopped reacting negatively to the device, you can incorporate a small brush of the fur while the kitten is eating the treats – if it seems appropriate, briefly pet the kitten with the device. If the kitten reacts with a “NB”, place the device on the surface near the kitten’s feet acknowledging the kitten’s fear and then immediately begin to give treats with the device again.

Once the device is introduced and accepted by the kitten, the use of the backscratcher (**by all trainers**) offers the kitten consistency, routine, and some anticipation of what to expect during the session. Use of the device can be as brief as letting the kitten smell the backscratcher at the beginning of your visit. It can be used solely as a ‘cue’ for what is to come, or for as much interaction as the trainer feels comfortable. The tool should be used throughout the visit to pet and touch the kitten if hand petting is not an option.

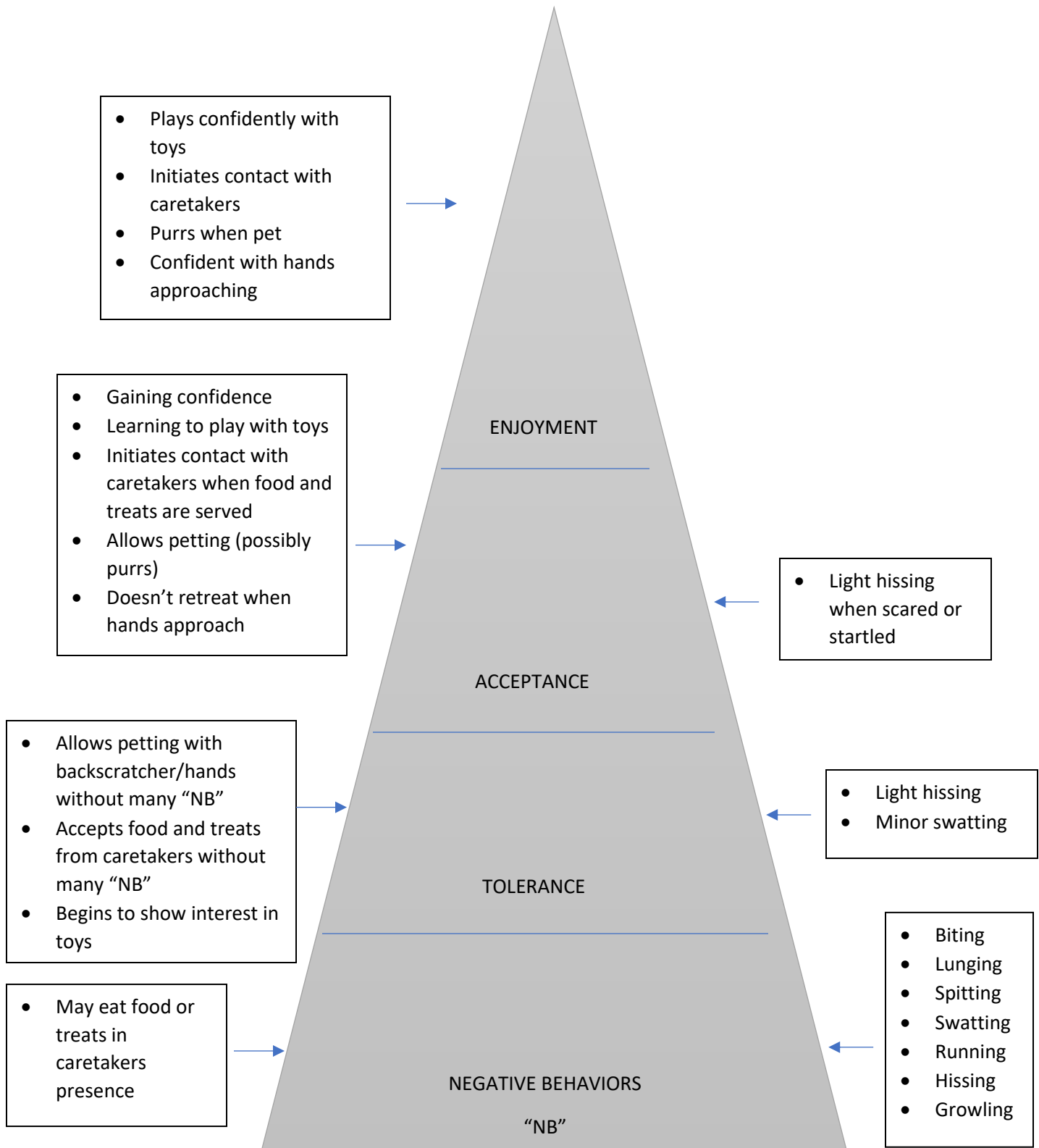
For extremely aggressive kittens, gloves can be used, but gloves can be scary and carry the scent of other cats that have been handled. Use less frequently.

FOUR STATES OF SOCIALIZATION

This training describes four states of socialization: **Negative Behaviors, Tolerance, Acceptance, and Enjoyment**. Characteristics of one state will cross over to other states as the kitten moves from one state to another. Expect to have 'grey' areas when you'll be working with strategies from two different states.

The pyramid of socialization on the following chart offers on the left "positive" behaviors to expect in each of the states and "negative" behaviors to expect in each state listed on the right.

Pyramid of Socialization



Negative Behaviors

In this training, behaviors inconsistent with adoptability are described as Negative Behaviors. These can include: Biting; Lunging; Spitting; Swatting; Running; Hissing; Growling.

If you are training a kitten in the NB state it is imperative to have very small goals for each visit. If you arrive with the goal of having the kitten play with a toy, or being able to pet the kitten, it will be difficult to walk away feeling as if progress has been made.

For kittens in this state, allow 24 hours with as little interruption as possible for the kitten to acclimate to its new surroundings. Introduce the backscratcher after 24 hours and during the first visit (as described in the *Use of Touch Tools* section).

Attainable goals in this state are:

- Introduction and tolerance of touch tools (backscratcher)
- Reducing type and duration of negative behaviors (e.g., kitten reacted only with hissing and swatting this visit (versus biting, hissing, swatting), and negative behaviors lasted 1 minute instead of 3 minutes)
- Eating treats in your presence
- Eating wet food in your presence

Strategy suggestions for this stage are:

- Talking softly while moving in and out of the room to deliver food and while cleaning
- Sitting and being quiet until negative behaviors subside
- Using the backscratcher to initiate touch – start by simply resting the backscratcher on the body, and add light strokes on the neck or head. Reward often with treats or wet food provided to the kitten using the backscratcher. (Note: If the kitten reacts negatively to the use of the device, stop and place the scratcher on the floor or surface area at the base of the kitten's body. Keep the device still for a few seconds and then use the scratcher to offer a treat and gently begin touching the kitten again with the device while it eats the treat).

At this stage, **more visits** that are **shorter** in duration (5 to 10 minutes) are often more effective than one long visit. If you are making progress, however, stay as long as possible.

If the kitten continues negative behaviors to a point that the session is not improving you have two options:

1. Look the kitten directly in the eyes and softly but firmly say “no” then immediately break the glance and look away. This is confrontational to the kitten, but does say in their language that you’re willing to stand your ground. By breaking the glance you have stopped being a threat. Use the backscratcher to give a treat after breaking the glance. Take a short break and repeat. The cat may continue to attack the stick, or realize it is not a threat and tolerate being touched.
2. Or, if the session is truly not working due to repeated negative behaviors then cease all interaction and wait for the kitten to calm down. Once there are NO negative behaviors occurring then put down a few treats nearby and leave the room. Do NOT leave the room while negative behaviors are occurring unless your safety is an issue. Leaving while negative behaviors occur will train the kitten that behaving negatively makes the session end.

Be on the lookout for physical cues of stress when dealing with kittens in the NB Stage. Short breaths, licking lips and shifting weight all indicate that a cat is fearful and may need a break. Talk to the cat, acknowledge that you know it is afraid, pause, and then resume. To make progress, we have to push them out of their comfort zone, but acknowledging their fear shows that you’re not there to hurt them. You must build trust so err on the side of being respectful while still moving forward. However, if a kitten is very shut down (shaking/licking lips/fearfully trying to run from you), keep your visit very short at the beginning – 2 minutes. Leave a treat or wet food before you go, sending the message that nothing bad happened. In the instance of a kitten being truly traumatized by your presence (not just negative behaviors) you may need multiple brief experiences before you can truly interact with the kitten.

When working with very fearful kittens, stay back from them (give them space) and avoid eye interaction when you first arrive. Talk to them and let them relax a bit before you approach them.

Tolerance

Some kittens with prior interaction with humans or innately prone to being submissive will arrive already in the Tolerance stage. This stage forgoes most of the Negative Behavior stage and usually allows for hand petting fairly quickly.

Attainable goals in this state are:

- Acceptance of hand pets
- Interest in toys
- Eating out of caretaker hands
- Acceptance of hand pets directly at face without pulling away
- Allowing a brief scruff of the neck (this is extremely helpful later for vet visits, etc.)

Strategy suggestions for the Tolerance stage include:

- Introduce hands:
 - Safest way: use backscratcher for several minutes until kitten is relaxed. Continue to use scratcher and place hand on top of scratcher (using device somewhat as a shield). If no negative reaction, stop using scratcher and continue petting with hand.
 - Hold a dish of wet food near to the kitten. While kitten is eating raise a finger that they 'bump' into. They will usually (initially) lurch away, but after 'bumping' into the finger or side of hand several times they will no longer fear it.
- Introduce toys:
 - Some kittens are initially fearful of toys. Go slowly and praise/reward any attempt at interacting with you/toys.

In this stage, longer visits are advised – usually no less than 20 to 30 minutes. Long, sustained interaction (especially petting) is extremely helpful in building trust.

Acceptance

Forgotten Kittens will always need to graduate to this stage. Acceptance stage is a stage at which kittens can be adopted to cat-savvy homes which understand or are willing to learn how to continue socializing to the enjoyment stage.

Attainable goals in this state are:

- Bringing shy kittens out to the middle of the room (gaining confidence)
- Play with toys without fear
- Initiates contact and flirts with caretakers when food and treats are served
- Allows full-body petting (usually purrs)
- Doesn't retreat when hands approach

Strategy suggestions for the Acceptance stage include:

- Push shy kittens by requiring them to come out farther into the room
 - Place food bowls slightly farther away (this can be a baby-step process so take time and 'inch' them out comfortably)
 - Use toys to entice them to chase
 - Make a trail of treats farther into the room
- Increase their tolerance to be scruffed.
- Introduce your hands under their belly and lift them slightly off the ground (for a 'nanosecond' and usually done while they are eating).
- Introduce carriers and condition kittens to accept them by placing treats and wet food inside

Enjoyment

CONGRATULATIONS. You've made it to the Enjoyment stage. Give you and your fellow FK trainers the credit you deserve for helping a once-feral kitten learn the behaviors necessary to thrive and enjoy the love and attention of its human companions.

During this stage it's important to just maintain positive human interaction through play, petting, and treats. Work on any small issues the cat may still need help with – such as gaining more confidence, being picked up, etc.