



Animal Husbandry In the Home Cattery



Part Three: LifeCycle Issues

These guidelines are designed to assist breeders in understanding and implementing positive animal husbandry practices in an in-home cattery. This document does not cover all aspects of cat breeding in any depth. Parts of it may also not apply to early generation Bengal cats. Breeders should use the advice of their mentors, a mentoring list, their veterinarian, books, and refer to other print and online resources for more detailed information. A list of TIBCS-reviewed resources for breeders is available from the TIBCS Recording and Correspondence Secretary.

The guidelines are divided into three parts. This is the third of the three and covers lifecycle issues, including kittens, socialization, and selecting and retiring breeding cats. The first part of these guidelines is devoted to how to set up and implement a home cattery, and the second part covers the basics of reproduction. The other two parts are available on the TIBCS website or from the TIBCS Recording and Correspondence Secretary.

Raising Kittens

Breeders usually have an easy time in the beginning of the kittens' lives as the queen does the bulk of the work. The breeder is mainly the watchful eye and the creator of a safe, warm, clean environment these first few weeks.

Newborn Kittens

- Observe often to ensure all are nursing
- Check for cleft palette or other birth defects
- Track weight of kittens daily
- If you observe a physical abnormality, if the queen is shunning the kitten, if the kitten is not gaining weight on a daily basis, or if the kitten constantly cries when its mother and siblings are with it, take the kitten to the vet. Even a delay of a day or two in obtaining appropriate veterinary care can be fatal to a very young kitten.

NOTE: Kittens that are born with a lethal birth defect (e.g., open spine, extreme cleft palette, extreme umbilical hernia) should be euthanized rather than being allowed to suffer until they die "naturally." Refer to the section on "Euthanasia and Death" later in this document.

2 to 4 weeks

- Daily human interaction for socialization
- Make sure eyes are opening and there is no swelling under the closed lids

4 to 6 weeks

- Play/socialize daily
- Introduce formula/ food mixture for gradual weaning
- Add small litter box with safe litter

NOTE: The most important period for kitten-human socialization is 2 to 7 weeks of age.

6 weeks to adoption

- Follow vaccination and worming schedule
- Check for parasites
- Play and socialize

Social and Intellectual Stimulation and Interaction – From Birth to Adult

Kittens

Stimulation begins from the moment a kitten is born.

- Handle the kitten
- Massage the kitten
- Breathe on the kitten
- However, keep the kitten with the queen and be aware that a queen, especially a first-time queen, may be upset if her kittens are handled too much before 3-4 weeks of age. Keep the mother's reactions in mind and do not handle the kittens to the point where she moves them. Moving kittens is often a health and safety issue.

As the kitten matures

- Handle, handle, handle, and pick up the kitten, holding it securely. The more you can massage and get it used to the sounds and activity of a home, the better.
- Think “human family” environment with dogs, cats, children, television, doors open closing, music, talking... all of these introduced at a young age make for a more confident cat.
- Make sure children are around the kittens as they grow. If you do not have children, hire a neighbor's children to come over and play with the kittens. Have children sit down when playing with kittens, give them flying toys, etc., and a lot of different ways to stimulate the kittens.
- Of the senses, SMELL is the most important to a cat. Introducing newness with the right smell helps make things less traumatic.

Many breeders worry about exposure before the kitten is immunized. Use common sense, but the kitten needs to be exposed to a certain amount of “life” in order to produce a healthy immune system.

If a kitten is shy and not trusting of human interaction

- Isolate the kitten from the other kittens at about seven weeks of age. The isolation room should not have hiding places.
- Go into the room with toys and noises, luring the kitten to interact with you.
- Allow the kitten to come to you; do not reach for the kitten.

- In extreme cases you might, for a limited time, make the room dark and provide water and a litter box but no food. When you come in, sit down and use treats to coax the kitten to approach you.

Young adult

Nothing takes the place of being held, picked up and stretched by firm, supportive hands.
Provide lots of toys and interactive stimulation.

Adult

If your home cattery includes cats that are kept isolated from all-day contact with people and other cats, those cats need a lot of things to play and interact with to make them happy.



Being handled and stretched increases a kitten's confidence.

Think Interactive

- Hide some food in interesting places such as high on a shelf, inside a ball with holes that allow food to drop out...make feeding time interactive and stimulating.
- Have shelves or hammocks for jumping, climbing and sleeping.
- Lots of toys that dangle, hang, and cause interaction when hit.
- Don't be afraid to be creative!

Also refer to the section on "Crowding, Space and Exercise" in Part One of these Guidelines.

Placing Kittens

As a breeder, you are responsible for the kittens you place.

At a minimum, kittens must be at least 12 weeks old before going to their new home. If possible they should remain with their littermates longer (16 weeks) in order to develop greater confidence, gentler play habits, and to receive a full set of the vaccinations and other preventative health care recommended by your veterinarian. Refer to the section on "Disease, Parasite Management, and Health" in Part One of these guidelines.

When you place kittens as pets:

- Interview potential buyers to ensure that your kitten will be understood and will receive appropriate care.
- Learn about the environment in which the kitten will be living and ask yourself if your kitten will be happy there. For instance, some kittens may be too shy to be happy in a home with a large number of young children.
- Ascertain the buyer's expectations, and be candid about how well the kitten will meet those expectations. For instance, if the buyer wants a Bengal that will travel with them, does the kitten

they want have the temperament for this?

- Educate potential buyers about the behavior they can expect from a Bengal. For instance, a buyer who wants a “couch potato” cat will probably not be happy with a Bengal’s high energy level.
- Discuss the purchase contract with the buyer to ensure that he understands and accepts the requirements in the contract.
- Either place your kittens already spayed/neutered or require that the buyer provide you with proof of altering and keep the kitten’s registration papers until you have that proof. Another option is to co-own the cat until you have proof of altering (using the type of co-ownership that requires that both parties must sign off in order to register offspring). Be cautious of the purchaser who does not like this requirement or who wants to have “just one litter”---this is how kitten mills get their breeding stock and how many backyard breeders get started.
- Provide the kitten’s vaccination and health records to the new owner.
- Make yourself available for support and mentoring to new Bengal owners after the sale.
- If a kitten placement does not work out well, you have an ethical responsibility to help rehome the kitten or cat if necessary.

When you place kittens as breeders (or re-sell an adult as a breeder)

- Investigate the potential buyer and his program. If you do not feel comfortable with the breeder’s program or the care he provides for his breeding cats, look elsewhere.
- Make sure that kittens, especially stud kittens, will not spend their life under conditions that you yourself would not tolerate for your breeder cats.
- Make sure the buyer uses a contract that you are comfortable with for all kittens. Remember that YOUR cattery name is forever attached to this kitten and its future progeny.
- Be candid about temperament, possible recessives, genetic health concerns, and cosmetic conditions (such as lockets) that may be of concern to the buyer. Remember that not all kittens may be breeder quality and should not be placed as breeders.

The kittens you place are always a reflection of your own program --- be prudent. **Think through and USE contracts.**

Selecting Breeding Cats

- Study pedigrees and research lines (brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, etc.).
- Be aware of all potential genetics and to what degree you wish to incorporate them into your program.
- Though pattern and coloring may vary according to the goals of your program, a stud should be an exceptional representative of the breed in terms of type, structure and vigor as he will put his genetic stamp on all or most of your kittens.
- Consider how well the cat will “go” with your existing cats of the opposite gender (see the discussion about selecting potential mates in the section on “Mating Management” in Part Two of these Guidelines).
- If you are considering keeping a cat of your own breeding, think ahead to its potential mates. Home cattery breeders need to be alert to the potential problems of keeping too many closely-related cats and inbreeding (for instance, putting a daughter back to her father because there are no outcross males available).

Retiring Breeding Cats

Cattery management is a very difficult balance of numbers and space. This is something that each breeder will have to consider in making decisions on what cats to keep in a breeding program, which to place in other programs, and which to spay/neuter.

While saving room to keep a few retired cats is common, keeping too many can eventually cause overcrowding. You must consider the best interests of the cat: a cat sharing its home with 10 others is not going to get the attention of a cat in a one- or two- cat family. It's nice to have a retired female or two to keep your current stud cat company when he's not breeding, but keeping every retiree may not be healthy for your program or your cats. Your breeding males and females deserve a happy, pampered, and timely retirement.

There are many factors to take into account when you are deciding when to retire a cat and which cat to retire. Just a few of these factors (this is not a comprehensive list) are:

- Does the cat produce what you want? Has the cat "out-produced" itself?
- Do you have enough of that line?
- Are there temperament issues with its offspring (e.g., excessively shy, hard to handle)?
- Does the cat have undesirable genetic traits (e.g., tail kink, carry color or pattern genes that you don't want in your program)?
- Does the cat have health problems?
- Is the cat happy in your cattery situation?
- If the cat is female, is she a good, reliable mother? Are her heat cycles and fertility good?
- If the cat is male, does he breed well? Is he easy to handle? Does he do his job with all females?

The age of the cat and the number of litters produced (in the case of queens) are some of the other factors to consider. In general, younger cats adapt better than older ones to rehoming; it is also easier to find new homes for younger cats than for older ones.

All breeding adults should be altered before they are rehomed as pets. A male may keep spraying for 3 to 4 months after altering and (though this is not common) may never stop.

Euthanasia and Death

Euthanasia

The decision to euthanize a cat is always difficult and heart-wrenching. Sometimes a cat will have an incurable condition and be suffering without hope of recovery, but even in those cases it is hard to know exactly when the time has come to let him or her go. You can only do your best. Consider the condition of the cat, and when the time comes be generous enough to have it euthanized and save it misery, even though the decision will cause you misery. The bottom line is that you are responsible for the quality of life of all cats in your care. It is your job as a breeder to put the well-being of the cat ahead of your own feelings and suffering. It may be the final, greatest, and perhaps hardest act of love and care you can perform for your beloved cat.

Euthanasia is best done by lethal injection administered by your veterinarian.

NOTE: Cats will purr and act affectionate even when in severe pain or distress. In a cat that is sick or suffering this is a care-soliciting behavior, not a sign of happiness and well-being. It may not always be obvious to you that your cat is suffering, so when there is any doubt in your mind ask your veterinarian for an honest and straightforward evaluation of the animal's quality of life as he sees it. Many cats have suffered to the end when a gentler way was possible. (But warning: Know your vet. Some will advise you to needlessly prolong the suffering of your cat in order to spare your feelings.)

Death

Every breeder, including you, will eventually have a kitten or cat that dies without apparent cause, without warning, or in spite of everything you can do to save it. This is a part of breeding. If you feel you are having an unusually high number of deaths, consult your veterinarian.

It is sometimes helpful to have a post-mortem examination done (in animals, this is called a "necropsy," not an "autopsy"). Most veterinarians can perform a simple examination of the internal organs, but tissue, fluid, and samples from specific organs must usually be sent to a certified testing laboratory. If you wish to have tissue samples examined or analyzed, be sure to refrigerate but not freeze the body.

Hints for Selecting a Veterinarian

You need a veterinarian who:

- Is comfortable working with breeders
- Is willing to keep abreast of new advances in knowledge
- Is experienced with and knowledgeable about feline reproductive problems. Many veterinarians are concerned almost solely with vaccinations, parasite control (e.g., fleas, worming), post-accident care, and standard spaying/neutering.
- Does not run your costs up with unnecessary or elaborate testing
- Is open to "new" procedures such as early spay/neuter, treating pyometria instead of spaying for it, etc.
- Has convenient hours of operation and location

Try cost-comparison "shopping around" when it comes to selecting a vet for such standard services as Health Certificates for shipping or for giving vaccinations and deworming (for instance, does the veterinarian give a discount if you have an entire litter done at once?). You may end up having two veterinarians, one for basic care and one that is a feline reproduction specialist for more demanding health issues.