

Eight Things Fostering Kittens Have Taught Me About Infant Feeding

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Clinician Corner

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My son Elijah and I have been fostering kittens for our local humane society for the past 3 years. We have fostered 20 batches of kittens; a total of about 50 kittens over 3 years. It has been very rewarding to watch my son nurture these little ones. What I did not realize was how much this was going to educate me about human lactation and some of the realities of formula supplementation.

We are in charge of the kitten's physical and emotional development. Not too much food, not too little. Having these babies in my home each day allowed me to really see what is *normal* for mammals to do when they are not breastfed. A note here: these are kittens that have come in without their mothers. If there is a mother cat, they all get fostered out together and the mother takes care of feeding her babies! The Humane Society is excited about having the mother cats nurse because they know the babies will be healthier.

Here are some of the lessons I have learned.

Lesson 1. How Much to Supplement

We know how much to feed kittens. Whenever we pick up a new batch of babies, we get very specific information about feeding. How much, of what, how often, and when to increase the total amount of supplementation over time. Our first batch of kittens was older, 5 weeks or so, and didn't need as much care. They ate kibble, which was always available, and we were told to give them one teaspoon of wet food four times/24 hours/kitten. They were vigorous and healthy. This was very easy. They were supposed to gain *on average* about 0.5 oz/24 hours. The Humane Society didn't even give us a baby scale. We saw the vet every 2 weeks and she confirmed that we were doing well with feeding amounts.

One of our recent batches of two kittens was our youngest yet. These babies were less than 8 oz per kitten! They were being syringe fed every 3 hours during the day and going for one 6-hour stretch at night. We were told they needed 10 ml/8 oz per feed. 6 feeds per 24 hours. That

works out to 60 ml/24 hours/kitten. We were told this orally and given a written copy of these instructions. We were told that as the kittens gained weight, they would need a few cubic centimeters more every 2–3 days. What detailed instructions! What a relief!

How does this compare to what we tell bottle (human milk or formula) families, or families that are doing transitional supplementing? I am sure it does vary greatly from hospital to hospital and doctor to doctor. In my area, I feel these families are given little to no information. Most of the time during the visit with the pediatrician if there is a weight-gain issue, no instructions on feeding are given, verbally or written, except to give them 2 extra oz of formula after every feed. I know 21 years ago, I was given no directions on Day 5 for my then formula-feeding son. I feel little has changed. No instructions on how much to feed, or even how to bottle-feed. I was giving my 8-lb son about 40 oz/24 hours! No wonder he spit up *a lot* after every feed. We do know roughly about how much human babies need to eat in 24 hours. After Day 10, they need *about* 2.5 oz/pound/24 hours. Neonatal intensive care units use 150 ml/kg. Easy. Figure out how much they need to eat in 24 hours based upon their weight. Then, count how many times a baby is eating in 24 hours. Divide the total number of ounce/24 hours by how many times a baby is eating per 24 hours. There is more information here: <http://bfcaa.com/bottle-feeding-basics-how-much/>.

For example, if a baby weighs 8 lb, we know they need about 20 oz/24 hours. Say they eat 10 times a day. Divide the total amount needed in 24 hours by the number of feeds. They need about 2 oz/bottle. In the first 10 days, we know babies need drops of milk in the first day, a bit more the second, and a bit more of the third day. This gradually increases until about Day 10 when our calculation, 2.5 oz/lb/24 hours, is valid. This plateaus at about 25–30 oz of breast milk or formula per 24 hours for the first year. Some babies do end up taking a bit more than this, but, in general, this holds true. After the baby is 1 year old, the amount of breast milk babies need gradually decreases until it is entirely replaced by table foods by age 2–5 years.

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Lesson 2. We Were Also Given Instruction on What Position to Put the Kittens in While Syringe Feeding

Apparently, kittens like laid-back feeding too! To syringe feed, they needed to be secure, laying on their bellies with their chin off their chests. The syringe comes from in front of them, at little higher than chin level, so they have to lift their heads a bit. They like their front paws touching the hand that is holding the syringe for stabilization. Once they are in the right position, well-supported, with their chin off their chest, they latch and feed well! If not, they fumble around, latch, and delatch. This is very frustrating both for us and the hungry kitten.

Lesson 3. Babies Will Eat the Right Amount if They Are Fed Slowly

So true! I do not know how to pace feed a kitten with a syringe. The babies flounder around, mouthing the syringe and meowing, until they finally get in the right position, latch on, and *suck*. Fast. Ten ml in about 45 seconds. Guess who is still meowing and crying once they have gotten their feed? The kittens! They ate so fast they don't know they are full yet. However, if you cuddle them up, wash their little faces, wipe their genitals so they pee, they settle down. But, we had to give them that time. If we just offered more food, I know they would have eaten it. See Lesson 4.

Lesson 4. It Is Easy to Overfeed Babies if You Are Bottle (or Syringe) Feeding

They can eat so fast! The lack of information that we give parents is a factor again. Even if you know how much they are supposed to eat, it is easy and tempting to give them some more! I learned that it feels *good* to overfeed baby kittens. They are so calm and cuddly after they have been overfed! If a little is good, a lot is great? Food = Love. This is a prevalent association in our culture. If families have been breastfeeding and they do find the baby hasn't been gaining well, *feeding* feels really good. I have seen this over and over. Often underweight babies do need extra calories for a while to catch up. That's okay. If I had a kitten who was still acting hungry after the appropriate amount of supplementation, I would give him another 2 ml or so. But once the kitten has returned to a proper weight by gaining an extra oz or two for a few days, the kitten needs to return to a normal average weight gain, about 0.5 oz per 24 hours. Kittens, however, have an easy way to stop you from overfeeding. If you overfeed a kitten, they get diarrhea. Overfeeding is one of the biggest causes of kitten diarrhea, so you

will cut back on the amount very quickly! Our human babies are wearing diapers, so this limiting factor doesn't come into play. I do wonder how much colicky behavior is actually caused by overfeeding?

Lesson 5. A Baby's Weight Goes Up and Down, Depending on the Day

Kitten weight gain does not happen in an even fashion. Some days they gain 2 oz. Some days, they gain 0.5 oz, which is the average amount of kitten weight per 24 hours. However, some days they actually *lose* weight! The greatest weight loss of a healthy kitten in a 24-hour period has been 1.0 oz in my kitten weight data to date. Yikes! So, weight gain really needs to be looked at every 3 days or so, not every day. Unless you are really worried about a baby, having them come in every day for weight checks is not only perhaps inconclusive, but also cruel to parents who are already exhausted and scared. So far, weighing every 3 days seems good for baby kittens who are over 4 weeks of age. In addition, all this weighing can lead to scale addiction. See Lesson 6.

Lesson 6. It Is Easy to Become Scale and Weight Obsessed

Addiction seems like a strong word, but it has happened to me with some of these little ones. I was weighing some of them four times per day! I got so caught up in the numbers that I stopped trusting my eyes and gut. We were given these little babies and it was up to me to make them thrive! Now our goal is to weigh the ones who weigh under 16 oz once per 24 hours (see Figure 1) and then once they are over 16 oz every 2–3 days until we get bored with the extra work. This is usually around 20 oz or so (see Figure 2). Because I was weighing kittens to gather data for my own education, future presentations, and articles like this one, I started obsessing over the numbers on a moment to moment basis, and not looking at the whole kitten, at the big picture.

Lesson 7. In General, Healthy Babies Will Eat Well and Look Vigorous

Sick babies will not. We have had kittens with fleas, goopy eyes, lethargic from vaccinations, but they would all eat. In contrast, I did have one little guy who was sneezing and wheezing. I didn't like the look of this kitten when he had his first feed of the day. He ate a bit, but then wanted to curl up in my lap. He did play a bit after that. The next feed, he just wanted to curl up, not eat, and there was no play. I called the vet and they told me to bring him in later in the day. I got off the phone

Figure 1. About 4 weeks old and under 16 oz. Watch weight carefully.



Figure 2. About 8 weeks old and 32 oz. Let the vet monitor weights and relax!



and looked at this baby again. Nope. We were taking him in now. I did. They said he was very sick and were glad I brought him in. Guess what? I knew this.

Lesson 8. Use All of Your Assessment Skills!

You will know if your babies are sick or underweight. I work with interns and teach a 90-hour course for lactation professionals. I talk a lot about Suzanne Colson's idea of assessment at a glance. We all do this! We take a look at the baby (and mother) and determine if we need to take immediate action. I have sent partners out for formula during a consultation when we couldn't get breast milk transfer from the breast using pre- and postweights, or any breast milk from hand expressing. Also, what about babies who are being overfed? I had one baby in my practice who was born at 34 weeks. The family had been told to fortify the mother's pumped breast milk until the baby was 12 weeks old, about 6 weeks gestationally. I saw the baby at 8 weeks and this baby was so fat he was round!

I needed to call the pediatrician to have a weight check. Fortification is appropriate for some babies, but not for this little one! The doctor saw the baby and a new feeding plan was created, minus the fortification.

Having these kittens in my life has made me far more empathetic to my families that are supplementing. I have to trust that I am doing a good job with feeding the kittens. Yes, I have some very useful tools, like how much to feed them, but in general I need to trust my sense of how they are doing. Families need to do this too. Given their lack of instruction and education it is no wonder they are struggling and feel unsure. We can provide accurate information about proper feeding amounts and how to do it in such a way that the baby can become part of the conversation. This takes a lot of trust. But, you know what? So does raising a child. If we can help parents trust their hearts and their guts that their babies are feeding well when they are babies, we are helping teach a lifelong, invaluable lesson, leading them in the right direction for the rest of their lives.



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