

## Infants, children, and cats

How the cat responds to a new baby or child will depend upon previous experiences as well as the cat's genetic temperament. The most sensitive time for cats to begin learning positive social experiences is in the first 2 months of life, although ongoing positive exposures through to adolescence also play an important role. Some cats will adapt quickly to children and new babies by either ignoring them or eventually seeking them out for investigation or social contact (e.g., bunting or cheek rubbing), while others may immediately be inquisitive, playful, and affectionate. While investigation, seeking affection, and social contact may be desirable, these behaviors must be well supervised since they can still lead to injury to the child, or inappropriate responses from the child to the pet. Fortunately most fearful cats will avoid as long as they are not restrained and have sufficient opportunity to retreat to an area in which they feel safe and comfortable. However, cats that respond with aggression can be particularly dangerous.

There are three basic considerations for helping cats to adapt to new babies or children. The first is to adapt the cat's schedule, permitted behaviors, family interactions, and environment slowly so that it is prepared for the arrival. The second is for the family to supervise all interactions with the cat and the baby to ensure safety, and so that positive interactions can be rewarded. The third is to help the child adapt to the needs and tolerance of the cat so as to prevent the development of behavior problems.

### **Advanced preparation of the home**

Many cats can become stressed and anxious when there are changes to their daily routine, social interactions, or environment. The cat's response may be a change in behavior or attitude with respect to humans or other cats (increased fear and avoidance, irritability, or aggression), urine or stool marking in the home, or displacement behaviors such as overgrooming and hair loss. There may also be an impact on the cat's physical health, such as a change in appetite (decreased or increased), activity level (increase or decrease), sleep-wake cycles, or even medical conditions with a stress-induced component (e.g., feline interstitial cystitis, a stress-related inflammatory disease of the bladder). The family should consider how the daily schedule, social interactions, and household will need to be changed when the new baby arrives and slowly begin to adapt the cat in advance of the new arrival. Whenever possible change should be made slowly and should be associated with positive events and interactions such as food, treats, affection, and play. For example, if the cat initiates play by chasing and play-attacking moving objects, the family should initiate and provide play sessions and play toys to meet the cat's needs. If there are rooms, counters, and areas of the house that will be out of bounds for the cat when the child arrives, then the family should begin in advance to keep the cat out of these areas, and teach the cat where it is allowed to sleep, play, and explore. It may also be advisable to set up any new furniture in advance of the baby's arrival, as some cats can be particularly sensitive or reactive to new structures and odors.

Some cats are anxious when they hear strange sounds. For these cats, a recording can be obtained of baby noises (e.g., cooing, crying, screaming). The recording should be played at a level that is low enough to cause no anxiety while tasty food treats, play, or catnip toys are offered. The volume should be gradually increased over several weeks until the cat seems comfortable with these noises at full volume. To prepare the pet for the new smells that will arrive with the baby, a towel or blanket with the baby's scent can be brought home from the hospital. The cat should then be taught to associate the object with favored rewards. On occasion, some cats may become anxious or overly investigative when a family member carries, changes, or nurses the new baby. Testing the cat by carrying around and fussing with a doll (especially one that actually moves and makes crying sounds) can be useful. A positive association should be made with this doll using favored play toys, treats, or food rewards before the baby arrives. If there is concern that additional safe control will be required to supervise and introduce the cat and baby, then training the cat to wear a body harness or giving it a separate room in which it can be housed comfortably can be extremely useful. In addition, using favored toys or treats, the cat can be trained to respond to a few positive commands (e.g., come, let's play, to your room), which could then aid the owners in engaging the cat in desirable behaviors at times when problems might arise. Some cats adapt better to change if a Feliway diffuser is placed in the environment.

### **When the baby arrives**

The simplest rule to help with the arrival of the baby is for all interactions with the cat and the baby to be supervised and kept positive, while monitoring for potential problem behaviors (fearful or overly aggressive, affectionate, or playful). Any major problems should be addressed with the aid of a qualified behavior consultant. At all other times, such as when the baby is sleeping or playing in its playpen, access should be prevented. Even an affectionate cat could choose to lie down next to the young baby, and this might be particularly dangerous for babies that cannot yet raise their heads or turn over. When the cat and child are together, all appropriate interactions should be reinforced. It can be particularly helpful to identify all things positive to the cat (food, affection, play, catnip, treats) and provide them when the baby and cat are together, while reducing their availability when the baby is not around. If the cat reacts fearfully or unpredictably or there is a potential danger or risk to the new child, then access must be prevented and a body harness might be used to ensure future safe introductions. If there are any changes in the cat's general demeanor, health, activity level, feeding, drinking, and elimination, these are signs that should be immediately reported to the family veterinarian. Occasionally, Feliway or anxiolytic drugs combined with the behavioral program can help the cat to adapt.

## As children grow up

As the child grows and becomes more mobile and interactive, the relationship between the cat and child may change. Fear and anxiety, as well as exuberant playful behavior, could become problematic. As always, supervision to assess the cat's response to the child and the child's interactions with the cat is the best way to ensure that desirable responses are rewarded and any undesirable responses are identified and the cat or child calmly removed from the situation. If problems do arise, preventing similar types of future interactions may be the safest plan, but a program of careful and entirely positive reintroduction might effectively improve the relationship.

As the baby continues to grow and mature, the cat will be exposed to a variety of new stimuli from the baby crawling to toddling to walking, and even trying to approach, grab, chase or take things away from the cat. Even if the cat has adapted nicely to a particular stage in the child's life, the family must always be prepared for a change in the relationship between the child and pet. Interactions between cats and young children should always be supervised. The spontaneous active behavior of children might be frightening for the cat or elicit unacceptable play behavior.

An important thing to remember is that children are great imitators. Family members must be good role models; they should not do anything to the pet that they do not want the child to do. This includes hugging, physical punishment, teasing, and rough play. Children don't know how to interact with animals, so they must be taught how to approach, handle, and play with the pet. While some cats will tolerate physical contact, the child will be safer if taught to avoid making contact around the eyes, ears, and head, and to stroke the cat along its side. Hugging, getting face to face, and lifting are not well tolerated by some cats and are best avoided. On the other hand, be aware of what your cat likes and dislikes. If it enjoys being lightly scratched between its ears or stroked over the shoulders, these types of interactions might be a place for the child to start. However, if the cat might bite when petted, or when certain parts of the body are touched, these types of interactions must be avoided and the practicality and safety of keeping this type of cat in a home with children must be evaluated and considered.

Children must also learn rules about other pets. The most important rule is that the child must *never* touch another family's pet or give it food unless an adult gives permission. Cats running loose should never be approached. All family members must also follow these rules as a model for the child's behavior. Children must be taught to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous behaviors. The family should review aggressive postures (growling, hissing, hair standing on end) and fearful behaviors (trembling, crouching, ears back, tail tucked, attempts to escape) so that the child learns to avoid these animals.

Other resources include a DVD that teaches children to be safe with cats, *Dogs, Cats and Kids: Learning to be Safe with Animals* (dogscatskids.com), and the website [www.growingupwithpets.com](http://www.growingupwithpets.com).