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## **INFANTS, CHILDREN, AND CATS**

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New or expectant parents typically have three major concerns: 1) How to prevent pet behavior problems from occurring after the baby arrives; 2) How to introduce the baby to the family cat; and 3) How to keep the child safe around the family cat as well as other animals. Pet owners often assume that jealousy is the cause of problem behaviors associated with the arrival of a new child into the home, but this is not the case. Most problems result from the anxiety caused by significant alterations in the pet's environment and the way the family interacts with the pet. Changes in feeding, exercise, and play schedules; changes in what the pet is allowed to do; changes in how the pet gets attention; and inconsistencies in the way the owner interacts with the pet can all lead to problems.

Pets don't innately know how to behave around children, and children need to learn how to interact with animals. While most cats accept the new arrival without much fuss, some do not. Cats can be unpredictable around children, varying from avoidance to intense interest. Fortunately, most problems can readily be avoided with some forethought and training.

### **When the baby comes home**

The cat's response to a new baby or to children will be primarily due to previous experiences with babies, children, and strangers, and the cat's genetic temperament. 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., cheek rubbing), while others may immediately be inquisitive, playful, and affectionate. While investigation and affection 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 toward the pet. On the other hand, some cats may be particularly fearful, which could lead to avoidance or aggression.

There are three basic considerations for helping cats to best adapt to new babies or children. The first is to adapt the cat's schedule, owner interactions, and environment slowly so that it is prepared for the arrival of the new baby. The second is for the owners 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 of the cat.

### **Adapting the home in advance**

Some 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 or increased irritability and aggression), urine or stool marking of the environment, or displacement behaviors such as overgrooming with hair loss (psychogenic alopecia). There may also be an impact on the cat's physical health, such as a change in appetite (whether markedly decreased or increased), activity level (increase or decrease), sleep-wake cycles, or organ dysfunction.

Owners should consider how the daily schedule, social interactions, and household will need to be changed when the new baby arrives and begin to slowly adapt the cat to these changes in advance of the new arrival. Wherever possible the changes should not only be made slowly, but should be associated with positive events and interactions such as food treats, affection, and play. If there are rooms, counters, and areas of the house that will be made out of bounds for the cat when the child arrives, then you 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 obtain and set up new furniture in advance of the baby's arrival as some cats can be particularly sensitive or reactive to new structures and new odors.

Some cats may be fearful or anxious of strange sounds. For these cats, a recording can be made of baby noises (cooing, crying, screaming, etc.). Play the recording for the cat so it can barely be heard, and slowly increase the volume until an

anxious response is obtained, then reduce the volume just below this level and play the tape while offering tasty food treats, play, or catnip toys. Very gradually increase the volume as the weeks go by until the pet seems comfortable with these noises at high volumes. To prepare the pet for the new smells that will arrive with the baby, take something home from the hospital, such as a towel or blanket with the baby's scent. Then teach the cat to associate the object with food or petting. On occasion, some cats may become anxious or overly investigative when the owner 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. If there is any anxiety, a positive association should be made with this doll using favored play toys, treats, or food rewards before the baby arrives (also see our handout on desensitization and counterconditioning). 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 can be extremely useful.

## **When the baby arrives**

The simplest rule to help with the arrival is to supervise all interactions with the cat and baby so that any potential problems (whether fearful, overly aggressive, overly affectionate, or overly playful) can be identified. Then, with the aid of a behavior consultant, the particular concerns can be addressed. At all other times, such as when the baby is sleeping or playing in its playpen, access to the baby should be prevented. Even an affectionate cat could choose to lie down next to the young baby, which might be particularly dangerous for babies that cannot yet raise their heads or turn over. When the cat and child are together, be sure to reinforce all positive and appropriate interactions and gradually shape desirable responses. 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. Conversely do not show anxiety, punish or immediately isolate the cat each time the baby is brought into the room, as this may lead to a negative or unpleasant association. If the cat reacts fearfully, or unpredictably, or there is a potential danger or risk to the new child, then a body harness can be used to help control the introductions.

Also be certain to monitor the cat's general demeanor, health, activity level, feeding, drinking, and elimination, and if there are any changes, report these to your veterinarian. These changes may not pose a risk for your child, but they may indicate that the cat is not coping well with the new arrival. Occasionally, pheromones or even drugs may help the cat to adapt if it is excessively anxious.

## **Cats and children**

As the child grows and becomes more mobile and interactive, the relationship between the cat and child may change. Both fear and anxiety and overexuberant playful behavior could be 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 reinforced and any undesirable responses are identified. If problems do arise, preventing interactions may be the safest plan, but a program of careful and entirely positive reintroduction is generally required to improve the relationship (see handout on desensitization and counterconditioning for additional details).

## **Health concerns**

It is rare for a cat to spread disease to humans. The number one health risk is from the physical injury caused by bites or scratches, so that injury prevention is the overriding concern. With some simple rules most other health problems can be prevented.

1. Have your pet examined and vaccinated at least once a year, and ensure that it is free of parasites.
2. Have a stool sample checked for parasites once or twice a year, and clean all stools from the yard immediately. Ensure that all family members wash hands after cleaning the yard, playing in the yard, or playing with the cat.
3. Have your pet examined immediately if there are any skin conditions or gastrointestinal conditions, as there are fungal infections (ringworm) and parasites (mites, fleas) and some intestinal bacteria that can be contagious to people. Similarly if there are skin conditions or gastrointestinal conditions among family members, have the pet checked.
4. It is also advisable to avoid allowing the cat to lick the face of children (especially around the mouth or eyes) and to teach the children to wash thoroughly after playing sessions with the cat.
5. Any bite or scratch should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected and wounds that break the skin or appear to become infected should be reported to a medical authority.
6. Clean the litter box frequently and keep it out of the reach of children.

## **Summary**

1. Prepare kittens during the early months of life with a variety of people, including young children.

2. Anticipate problems and work on their prevention well before the baby arrives home.
3. ALWAYS supervise pet/child interactions. Prevent access to the child when a responsible adult is not available to supervise.
4. Don't take the relationship between the pet and the baby for granted. Actively take steps to shape it in a positive way.
5. Avoid punishing the pet, banishing it from the room, or ignoring the pet when the child is present.
6. Teach children how to act around their pets, around other animals, and what to do if threatened.