

# Appendix 10

## Cats, Babies and Children

Cats can be loving and fulfilling pets for both adults and children, but problems can sometimes arise that might result in a child being bitten or scratched and the cat becoming stressed and frightened. As well as aiming to keep the child or baby safe, it is also wise to do the best you can to avoid the cat becoming stressed, because a stressed cat is more likely to develop behaviour problems such as indoor urine marking or aggression.

### A New Baby

#### Before the baby arrives

The arrival of a new baby can be a highly stressful time for a pet cat and it is important to prepare well in advance.

**Try to keep your cat(s) out of the room that you intend to use as the nursery.** It will be easier if you start to deny your cat access to this room long before the baby is due rather than trying to shut him out once the baby has arrived.

Allow your cat to become accustomed to the sights, sounds and smells of a new baby.

- Bring the equipment you will need for the new baby (buggy, carry cot, high-chair, etc.) into the house well before the baby arrives. Allow your cat to sniff, examine and become accustomed to them. Once your cat appears to accept them as he does the rest of the furniture in the house, then start to move them around the house on a regular basis, just as you are likely to do once the baby has arrived.
- The sounds of a new baby can sometimes be disturbing for a cat; it can therefore be a good idea to allow your cat to become accustomed to baby noises by playing recorded sounds at a very low level and then very gradually increasing them. Suitable recorded sounds are available for free online (for example <https://soundcloud.com/dogstrust/sounds-soothing-baby-crying>).
- If the baby is born in hospital, once he or she has arrived bring home a small blanket or similar that the baby has been wrapped in or slept on, and then place it somewhere that the cat can sniff it and become accustomed to the smell.
- Installing a facial pheromone diffuser at home at least 2–3 weeks before the baby arrives might also help your cat to cope.

#### Once the baby has arrived

**Never leave the baby alone with the cat.** Do not allow the cat to sleep in the same room as your baby unattended. It is an old superstition that cats deliberately suffocate

babies in their sleep but cats can be attracted to warmth and a cat may lie very close to the baby's face. Also, cat dander (shed from the coat and skin) can occasionally cause a serious allergic respiratory reaction (Herre *et al.*, 2013).

**Try to keep to your cat's normal routine as much as possible.** Household routines are bound to change once the baby has arrived, but it can be difficult for your cat to understand this.

- Try to continue feeding your cat when and where he is accustomed to being fed.
- Continue to allow him access to familiar, safe and comfortable resting places.
- As much as you can, continue to play, fuss and interact with your cat as you did before the baby arrived.

## Cats and Children

- Make sure that your cat has somewhere safe to retreat to away from the child(ren). For example:
  - Provide access to high shelves or the tops of cupboards, etc., or provide a tall and sturdy 'cat tree'.
  - Use baby gates to provide an area for the cat that he can access but the child(ren) cannot.
- Especially make sure that the child(ren) cannot disturb the cat while he is eating or sleeping.
- Prevent the child(ren) from trying to follow or disturb the cat by redirecting them onto another 'fun' activity away from the cat.
- Teach the child how to interact with the cat appropriately (Fig. A10.1). You might need to teach the child how to stroke the cat 'nicely' by gently guiding the child's hand with your own.



**Fig. A10.1.** Children should be taught how to stroke the cat gently and appropriately.

- If the cat is happy to be picked up, teach the child how to correctly hold the cat by supporting it fully underneath.
- If the cat does not like being picked up, dissuade the child from attempting to handle the cat. But try not to become angry with the child, try to redirect him or her towards a toy or other ‘fun’ activity instead.
- Never shout at, hit or try to physically punish the cat at any time, but especially not in front of the child(ren). Children often imitate the actions of grown-ups and the cat might react aggressively if the child tries to copy you. Also, the cat may associate your anger and the unpleasant event, not with his or her own behaviour, but with the presence of the child, thereby making the child appear to be a threat to the cat.
- Don’t encourage your cat or kitten to play at ‘attacking’ your hands or feet. If the cat tries to play the same rough games with a small child the child may be hurt.
- Teach the child(ren) to always go to you if the cat does anything that they don’t like. A young child may not deal with the situation in the most appropriate and safe manner.
- Your cat is likely to be less tolerant if he is unwell, so try to keep him healthy. Take him for regular veterinary checks and make sure that vaccinations, worming and flea treatments are kept up to date.
- Watch for signs that the cat may be feeling uncomfortable while the child(ren) are close by. For example:
  - Swishing or slapping tail.
  - Ears held back or to the side.
  - Low, slinking body posture.
  - Hissing.
  - Growling.
  - Trying to get away.

If you see any of these signs encourage the child(ren) away from the cat.

## Reference

Herre, J., Grönlund, H., Brooks, H., Hopkins, L., Waggoner, L., Murton, B., Gangloff, M., Opaleye, O., Chivers, E.R., Fitzgerald, K., Gay, N., Monie, T. and Bryant, C. (2013) Allergens as immunomodulatory proteins: the cat dander protein Fel d 1 enhances TLR activation by lipid ligands. *Journal of Immunology* 191, 1529–1535.

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