

Preparing Your Cat for Your New Baby

Many parents are concerned about how their cat will react to their new baby, or how to keep the baby safe around the cat. They believe the cat may develop behavior problems because she is “jealous” of the baby. In reality, behavior problems may develop because of the drastic changes in the environment associated with the arrival and time-consuming demands of the baby. Changes in the cat’s daily routine may occur (e.g. feeding time, play schedule, “quiet time” with the owner). Restrictions on where the cat is permitted to sit or sleep may be implemented. The majority of cats accept the new baby’s arrival without much to-do, however some do not. A cat’s behavior around babies can range from avoidance of the baby to intense interest, depending on the cat’s previous socialization experiences (with babies, children, and strangers), and the cat’s temperament. With supervision and training, most problems can be prevented.

Advance Preparation

Cats are creatures of habit. Changes in their daily routine and environment may cause them to become stressed and anxious. They may respond by hiding, becoming irritable and aggressive, urinating or defecating out of the litterbox, or by changing their eating habits (e.g. eating less or more). It’s very important to monitor your cat’s behavior during the first couple of months of the baby’s arrival to the home.

Prepare your cat for the baby’s arrival several months in advance. Gradually set up the house the way it will be when the baby arrives (e.g. set up the crib, begin by moving furniture around if room changes are to be conducted). This is the time to train your cat to not have access to areas where the baby will sleep if you want these areas to be off limits. Begin to make changes in the interaction you will have with your cat (e.g. less play/petting time). Introduce your cat to smells that will be associated with the baby (e.g. baby powders or lotions, diapers, blankets). Use treats when showing these items to your cat so that he, or she, associates a positive event (receiving a tasty treat) with these items (that will ultimately be associated with the baby).

Purchase CDs of baby cries/sounds and play them to your cat. Start by setting the volume as low as audibly possible and slowly, over the course of several weeks, increase the volume. Watch for signs of your cat becoming anxious or scared. If any of these signs are displayed, lower the volume. The idea is for your cat to remain in a relaxed state while listening to the tapes. Offer treats or play while playing the recording. Carry around a doll, preferably one with movable arms and legs and that cries, and handle it the way you would a baby. Allow your cat to sniff the doll, and give her (or him) treats for positive interactions with the doll (sniffing, head rubbing, purring).

Before the baby comes home from the hospital, bring home a blanket or towel that contains the baby’s scent. Allow, not force, your cat to smell the blanket or towel. Place the towel on the couch, or in an area where your cat will have the opportunity to explore it when ready.

Your Baby’s Arrival Home

All interactions between your cat and the baby **MUST** be supervised. This will not only prevent any immediate problems between the baby and your cat (e.g. the cat swatting at baby), but will aid in identifying, and treating, any problematic behavior between your cat and the baby (e.g.

your cat is so fearful of the baby that he or she hides or becomes aggressive, your cat becomes too playful with baby, leading to inappropriate play behaviors which could include scratching or biting, or the baby plays too rough with cat – babies love to pull on cats’ tails!).

Once you arrive home have someone other than the mom hold the baby so that she is free to greet her cat, who will no doubt have missed her. Wait several hours, or until the next day, before introducing your baby to your cat so that everyone in the household has had time to unwind and settle in. While seated on a couch with your baby, encourage your cat to come to you by calling him (or her). Allow your cat to approach and explore the baby at the cat’s own pace. Once your cat comes to you and sits by you and the baby, offer your cat treats. The goal is to have your cat associate the baby with positive happenings (again those tasty morsels!). NEVER hold or restrain your cat. If your cat reacts negatively to the baby (e.g. hisses), calmly get up with the baby and walk away. If your cat has a history of aggressive behavior, and displays signs of aggression towards the baby (growling, swatting, hissing) consider consulting with a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board certified veterinary behaviorist (DACVB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for advice. Clipping your cat’s claws, or investing in a product called Soft Claws®, will help prevent injury.

Try to maintain a regular routine with your cat to help her adjust. Spend some quality alone time with her each day playing with her or having a petting session, in addition to time with her and the baby together. Since you’ll have about 6 months before your baby begins to crawl, begin to perform behaviors that your baby will eventually engage in such as crawling, walking unsteadily, or running through the house. Play with the baby’s toys too. Praise your cat with tasty treats if she chooses to approach you, however if she chooses not to approach don’t force her. Place several cat perches up high, out of reach of the baby, or purchase a kitty condo so that she can view the goings-on from her “safe” place.

Once your baby does start to crawl, offer your cat treats, praise, or petting as a reward for staying near the baby. If you observe your cat gently sniffing your baby’s face, praise her for behaving so nicely around the baby. Cats do not suck the breath out of babies. That is an old wives tale!

At this point it will also be important to get your cat used to your baby’s hands reaching towards her to pet her. Typically babies start out by poking and prodding at the cat, perhaps even pulling her tail. To accustom your cat to these actions, gently grab, poke, and pull her ear or tail. Immediately after a poke or tail pull reward her with treats so she learns to associate good things with being handled in this manner. If she starts to become anxious when you reach for her, proceed more slowly and gently. Most importantly, teach your baby how to interact with your cat appropriately (e.g. gentle petting along the top of her head and back verses tail pulling or squeezing). This will help your baby and your cat establish a long-lasting loving, trusting bond.

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist