

Preparing Your Cat for a New Baby

Bringing home a new baby can be an exciting time! And growing up with a cat in the home can be great for your child's development, as it can lower their risk of developing asthma¹ and allergies², and can help teach your child to be empathetic³. But your cat may not be as pleased with the addition to the family. Thankfully, with a carefully organized transition you can set your cat and baby up for a beautiful friendship.



Before baby

Cats are often stressed by changes to their environment. Having a baby will lead to many changes in their life, so try to get them used to as many of these new things as possible in advance. Your life is likely to be hectic after you bring your baby home, so you will be glad you laid the groundwork for this in advance!

- Set up your nursery gradually, starting at least 1 month before your due date. Allow your cat to explore these changes to the room as you go, so your cat can slowly adjust.
- Anticipate any sounds or smells that will be likely with your new baby, and gradually introduce them to these things in combination with something they like (e.g., treats or play).
 - The cries of an infant are very similar to the distress cries of a kitten, so these may be particularly upsetting to cats. Consider gradually introducing your cat to these sounds using YouTube videos.
 - Begin wearing baby powder and baby lotion on your hands weeks before your due date, so they will start to associate the smell with you (someone they know and love!).
- If you can predict any changes to your cat's regular routine (reductions in interaction, changes to feeding times, or a new person acting as the primary caregiver), make these changes early.
- Ensure your home is properly enriched. Provide everything your cat needs to help them cope with stress and to keep from getting bored. Equip your home with opportunities for your cat to hide, perch, scratch, and play. See THS's Behaviour Info Sheet on "Enriching Your Home" for more information!
- Consider using a Feliway™ diffuser in or near your nursery. Feliway™ is a synthetic feline facial pheromone thought to have a calming effect on cats. There is some debate as to whether or not it works⁴, but some owners claim that it has had a profound impact on reducing their cat's fear.

After the baby is born

Your preparation has given you a head start on helping your cat accept your new family member, but there are still a few key actions you should take after the baby is born.

- While you are in the hospital, ask a friend or family member to take a blanket or item of clothing that your new baby has worn to your home and put it near your cat's food. This will allow your cat to investigate the smells on their own, and hopefully help them to develop a positive association with the scent.



- Once you arrive home with your baby:
 - Greet your cat without your baby first, in order to re-establish your bond with them.
 - Once things have settled down from the initial bustle of arriving home, hold your baby and allow your cat to investigate. Reward calm behaviours around your baby by providing treats. Do not force the interaction – if your cat begins to show signs of fear (such as crouching or large pupils) allow them to observe from a distance they deem as safe and throw them treats. If your cat continues to approach but shows concerning behaviours (such as flattened ears or growling) end the interaction by calmly leaving the room.
- Always supervise any interactions between your baby and cat.
 - Do not allow your cat into the nursery when you are not around. Despite rumours that cats may inadvertently suffocate babies while they are sleeping, there are no confirmed cases of this happening. However, it is entirely possible that your cat may scratch the baby (even accidentally) or urinate in the crib.
- A great opportunity to encourage your cat to form positive associations with your baby's presence is by giving them treats when you are feeding or holding your baby.
- Although most of your waking hours will be consumed by thoughts of your baby, it is important that you still make time to interact with your cat daily by playing, petting, or cuddling – whatever your cat likes best!
- It is very important that you do not punish any negative behaviours your cat shows towards your baby. This may strengthen any feelings of fear your cat has towards your baby and actually increase the intensity of these reactions in the future.

As baby gets older

Hopefully by now your cat has accepted your new family member. But as your baby develops into a toddler, new concerns will arise.

- Teach your baby to pet your cat gently. As they grow, make sure they learn to recognise signs of fear, anxiety, and stress exhibited by your cat, and to respond appropriately.
- Provide comfortable hiding spots out of your toddler's reach where your cat can relax undisturbed.
- Keep cat food bowls and litter boxes somewhere your toddler can't access.

Cats with pre-existing behaviour concerns

If your cat exhibits concerning unwanted behaviours (such as 'unpredictable' aggression, out-of-box elimination, or chronic fear) before you bring home your new baby, the transition may be more difficult. Begin to address unwanted behaviours as early as possible before your baby arrives.

- Contact your veterinarian. Many unwanted behaviour problems have underlying medical causes. It is possible that after an exam and a few tests, there may be a treatment that can resolve these behaviours quickly – and improve your cat's quality of life!
 - Your veterinarian may recommend behaviour medications to help manage event-based stress or chronic anxiety.
 - Consider also asking your vet to apply Soft Paws (temporary and humane caps that go over your cat's claws) if you have legitimate concerns about swatting.
- Barring a medical cause, there are many management and behaviour modification strategies that can help reduce or eliminate unwanted behaviours. There are many useful resources available online, but be sure visit reputable sources such as IAABC.org, ASPCA.org, or DrSophiaYin.com. For persistent problems or personal assistance, schedule a Feline Behaviour Consultation through the Toronto Humane Society!



- Despite your best efforts, some cats may not be compatible with a baby. In these cases, rehoming may be the best option for your family's safety and your cat's wellbeing. If possible, find a friend or family member who is willing to give your cat a new home. Cats with ongoing behaviour concerns typically find shelters more stressful than the average cat. This means that these cats are more difficult to find homes for – both because of their history of unwanted behaviours, and because these behaviours are often exaggerated by the stress they are experiencing in shelter.

Resources:

¹O'Connor, G. T., Lynch, S. V., Bloomberg, G. R., Kattan, M., Wood, R. A., Gergen, P. J., Jaffee, K.F., Calatroni, A., Bacharier, L.B., Beigelman, A., Sandel, M.T., Johnson, C.c., Farugi, A., Santee, C., Fujimura, K.E., Fadrosch, D., Boushey, H., Visness, C.M., Gern, J.E. (2018). Early-life home environment and risk of asthma among inner-city children. *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, 141(4), 1468-1475.

²Ownby, D. R., Johnson, C. C., & Peterson, E. L. (2002). Exposure to dogs and cats in the first year of life and risk of allergic sensitization at 6 to 7 years of age. *Jama*, 288(8), 963-972.

³Daly, B., & Morton, L. L. (2006). An investigation of human-animal interactions and empathy as related to pet preference, ownership, attachment, and attitudes in children. *Anthrozoös*, 19(2), 113-127.

⁴Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestrini, C. (2010). Systematic review of the use of pheromones for treatment of undesirable behavior in cats and dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 236(12), 1308-1316.

