

## Introducing Your Cat to 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 temperament. With supervision and training, most problems can be prevented.

### **Preparing Your Cat in Advance**

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 is very important to monitor the cat’s behavior during the first couple of months of the baby’s arrival to the home.

Prepare the 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 the cat to not have access to areas where the baby will sleep if these areas are to be off limits to the cat. Begin to make changes in the interaction you will have with your cat (e.g. less play/petting time). Introduce the 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 the cat so that she associates a positive event (receiving a treat) with these items (that will eventually be associated with the baby). Purchase audiotapes of baby cries/sounds and play them to the 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 the cat becoming anxious or scared. If any of these signs are displayed, lower the volume. The idea is for the 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 the cat to sniff the doll, and give the cat 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 his or her scent. Allow the cat, but do not force the cat, to smell the blanket or

towel. Place the towel on the couch, or in an area where the cat will have the opportunity to explore it when she's ready.

### **Baby's Arrival**

All interactions between the cat and the baby **MUST** be supervised. This will not only prevent any immediate problems between the baby and the cat (e.g. cat swats at baby), but will aid in identifying, and treating, any problematic behavior between the cat and the baby (e.g. cat overly fearful of baby, resulting in aggression or hiding from the baby, cat overly and inappropriately playful with baby, baby plays too rough with cat).

Once you arrive home, have someone other than the mom hold the baby so that she is free to greet the cat. 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 the cat to come to you by calling her. Allow the cat to approach and explore the baby at her own pace. Once she comes to you and sits by you and the baby offer her treats. The goal is to have the cat view associating with the baby as a positive experience. **NEVER** hold or restrain the cat. If the cat reacts negatively to the baby (e.g. hisses), calmly get up with the baby and walk away. If the cat has a history of aggressive behavior, and displays signs of aggression towards the baby (growling, swatting, hissing) consider consulting with an Applied Animal Behaviorist for advice. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent injury.

Try to maintain a regular routine with the cat as much as possible to help her adjust. Spend some time each day with just you and the cat, playing with the cat or having a petting session, as well as time with the cat and the baby. As the baby grows and becomes mobile and interactive with the cat, teach the baby how to interact with the cat properly (e.g. gentle petting verses tail pulling or squeezing the cat). This will help your baby and your pet to develop a loving, trusting bond.