

## CATS AND BABIES CAN COEXIST

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Cat shelters often take in cats cast out when the owner is expecting a first baby or because the cat scratched the baby and is, therefore, "jealous and vicious". Many other couples or expectant moms have had their pet cat(s) for many years before starting a family but reject the cat once the baby is due. You usually prepare for the birth of a baby once the pregnancy is confirmed; you should extend this preparation to your cat. By getting the cat ready for the event several months in advance, your baby can enjoy growing up with animals. Exposure to animals early on helps children to respect them and may even improve the immune system.



How will Puss react to the new addition? A timid cat that is over-dependent on you, but hides from other people, may become jealous and spray to cover up the scent of the baby. You need to help it become more confident and less dependent on you well before the birth. A devoted cat that joins in human activities will probably have hurt feelings but is likely to join in with caring for baby if you let him. An independent cat who treats you like a hotel will probably ignore the baby as long as hotel services remain unchanged. Many cats become protective of what they view as a 'people-kitten' and there are accounts of cats raising the alarm when a baby shows signs of sudden illness. Far from being vicious creatures willing to suck a baby's breath, some have even saved abandoned babies' lives by snuggling up to infants that were at risk of hypothermia. Cats' emotions are different to human emotions and, contrary to common belief, cats do not plot or plan to do future things through jealousy or vengefulness.

You may have heard old wives' tales about jealous cats harming infants by suffocation or mauling. These scary stories are widely circulated and regularly crop up on pregnancy forums. They are usually exaggerated and the few that are genuine are only newsworthy due to their **EXTREME** rarity. Tales about cats suffocating babies abound, but actual occurrences are very rare; in many cases the presence of the cat was incidental. There was *one* confirmed case where the baby inhaled the cat's fur and its breathing was obstructed. Use a crib-net to keep your cat out of the crib - this will reduce any accidental scratches and the transmission of bacteria. The endnote about the Malaysian baby caused scares but is *not* comparable to a domestic situation.

## BASIC HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

Get information from your doctor and your vet about cat-borne organisms that can harm unborn babies and take appropriate precautions; i.e. don't handle soiled cat litter and scrub garden vegetables before eating them. Toxoplasmosis can harm an unborn baby, but cats are not the sole source of toxoplasmosis. Use rubber gloves and common sense about hygiene when cleaning out litter trays (if this task is unavoidable). Also ensure Puss is healthy and vaccinated. De-flea and de-worm him regularly as you don't want either parasite transferring itself to a baby or child. Children have little concept of hygiene and roundworm infection is quite common. There are roundworm remedies available for children and adults from pharmacies, but prevention is preferable. In some countries, flea and tick bites can carry blood parasites that harm cats and humans, so flea and tick treatment is essential.

## **BE PREPARED - ESTABLISH A NEW ROUTINE**

Establish the cat's new routine gradually and well in advance of the new arrival. That way he has time to adapt. Let him sniff the crib, baby-bath, etc but teach him not to get inside them. Let him investigate the intended nursery room before making it out-of-bounds. If Puss knows what's in there, it is less of a tantalizing mystery and he's more likely to ignore it. You may need to fit a scratch-guard to protect the shut door from an over-curious cat.

If you're concerned that Puss will try to sleep with the baby (they are nice and warm to snuggle up to), get crib nets so he can't bed down with baby. These must be taut when fitted or the cat may use them as a hammock. Some readers have mentioned difficulty in getting these, but they can be fashioned from large sections of fine mesh lace curtain (net curtain) or mosquito netting.

As the time of arrival approaches, gradually reduce the amount of time spent petting your cat. Towards the end of pregnancy, Puss may not have much room to sit on the expectant mother's lap due to the "bump". Some cats are fascinated by the "bump," perhaps able to detect the movement within it. After the baby arrives you will have less time for petting, and it will be less of an upheaval if you have already weaned Puss off having you at his beck and call. Establish a special 'cat-time' (i.e. in the evening after a baby's bedtime) to spend quality time together or, if possible, get your partner or an older child to become more active in caring for the cat and giving it attention while you care for junior. Some older children enjoy taking on the responsibility of becoming "mother" to Puss.

## **AFTER THE ARRIVAL**

Ensure Puss's feeding area and litter tray are well away from areas needed for preparing baby's meals. Clean work surfaces before food preparation in case Puss has walked across them. As well as carrying in contaminants from outdoors or from the litter tray (normal bacteria from the feces may be beneficial in the gut, but are not beneficial if ingested), some cats carry the *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria associated with stomach ulcers. Simple hygiene using a cat- and baby-safe disinfectant or anti-bacterial spray are recommended. If you use litter trays, persuade Puss to use a covered litter-tray with a cat-flap entrance (this reduces odors and the scattering of litter by enthusiastic excavators).

When baby arrives, Puss will probably be curious and probably somewhat wary of the new and noisy arrival so don't panic when he sniffs or hangs around the crib. Many cats soon lose interest and look for entertainment elsewhere. Some become self-appointed guardians to the new arrival and will want to watch you as you care for the baby. The warmth of a crib, with baby in residence or not, is attractive to cats and though they usually stay away from a baby's face (contrary to old wives' tales, most cats dislike the smell of human breath). Keep the nursery door closed or fit a

screen door when baby is asleep, but make sure Puss is not accidentally shut inside the nursery. If the nursery is at ground level or accessible from a roof or wall, keep the nursery windows closed or fit mesh screens. This precaution will keep cats - including strays and neighbors' cats - from entering from outdoors. A baby alarm or intercom will allow you to monitor the baby.

Keep baby's feeding utensils out of Puss's reach and wipe up spilt baby food before Puss gets into the habit of hanging around and doing it for you. Keep cat food and baby food well separated to prevent cross-contamination. What goes in must come out (in the case of babies either upwards or downwards), so keep soiled diapers shut firmly away from Puss. Though it sounds gross to us, many cats are fascinated by bodily scents and will investigate soiled items. Something that many owners don't realize is that some cats love to chew or suck on wool and may be attracted to baby blankets! Wool-eating (pica) is more common in Siamese and related breeds. It is also not unknown for cats to steal small items of baby clothing (bonnets, booties) and take them to bed, perhaps attracted by the smell.

Avoid cross-contamination by washing your hands after petting the cat and after cleaning the litter tray, cat bedding, and food bowls. If possible, use a different pair of rubber gloves for these tasks. There are also alcohol-based anti-bacterial hand-scrubs available.

Don't leave cat and baby together unattended; most scratches are due to a cat fending off an inquisitive grasping or crawling baby. The jerky movements of a small child can catch a cat unaware and though it only means to fend off an "attack", cats' sharp claws and babies' fragile skin do not mix. Cats' mouths also carry lots of bacteria and though you shouldn't become paranoid (we actually need to encounter germs in order to develop a good immune system), it's not a good idea to let Puss keep licking the baby, however cute it seems - especially if you've just seen Puss leave his litter tray.

Inevitably you'll have friends and family round to see the new baby. Encourage these visitors to pay attention to the cat as well as the baby. Don't make Puss feel rejected, the baby is part of his life too and if he is made to feel part of the baby-raising activities, he will be more accepting of the noisy intruder. Babies can be very stressful, especially if you aren't getting a good night's sleep and your cat also wants some fuss. If you get tired or irritated, don't take it out on Puss. Always keep a sense of priorities. You only have one pair of hands: baby is top priority, cat usually second and most other jobs can wait a few minutes unless you have a partner to help out (or an older child to give Puss plenty of attention).

Last, but not least, regularly de-worm and de-flea/de-tick Puss. Check which flea powders and flea-sprays are safest in a house where there is a baby or toddler. Also comb Puss regularly to remove any fleas and any loose hair. Flea combing can be part of his quality time after baby's bedtime.

**For every several hundred people who have raised cats and babies side-by-side, or who have grown up with cats, there will be one person who claims horror stories.**

The Annual Register, January, 1791: A child of eighteen months old was found dead near Plymouth, and it appeared, on the coroner's inquest, that the child died in consequence of a cat sucking its breath, thereby occasioning strangulation.

**TALE: Grandfather's baby brother/sister was suffocated by a cat - the cat was**

**found lying on/near the dead baby's face.**

**FACTS:** In grandfather's time, cot death (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) was not known as such. In developed countries, infant mortality was much higher than today. The presence of a cat in or near the crib is not evidence of suffocation - it is circumstantial. In tragic cases of Sudden Infant Death, we want to blame someone or something. A cat is a convenient scapegoat. There may have been no postmortem, but the tale of the "killer" cat gets passed down through the generations and is accepted as fact despite a lack of real evidence.

**NOTES:** *Cats shed. If a cat should lie on a baby's face and the baby inhales, fur will be drawn into the airways. Every year there are (tragically for the parents) hundreds of unexplained sudden infant deaths, the presence of a cat being incidental.*

## **CRAWLERS AND TODDLERS**

The commonsense precautions about hygiene and supervision still apply once baby is starting to move around.

When junior reaches the toddler stage, you need to keep cat food and litter well out of reach. Make sure that Puss can get to his food, but junior can't reach it. Establish a cat-feeding area out of reach of a toddler, for example on a table in the utility room, otherwise your toddler may start helping himself to Puss's food. If junior does manage to sample Whiskies don't panic, just make sure the food bowl is placed well out of reach next time (in case you are worried, most cat foods are tested by human tasters and others have eaten handfuls of dried cat food with no ill-effects).

Children and cat litter trays do not mix. If you can put the tray in a room or closet accessed by a cat flap, this is ideal. Likewise, make sure the potty is out of the cat's reach as even a de-sexed cat (male or female) may attempt to spray it to cover your baby's scent. Once started, spraying habits can be hard to break.

Once your baby becomes aware of the cat, start teaching him how to interact gently with it. Baby must learn not to pull the cat about like a toy, grab its tail as a convenient handle, or disturb a sleeping cat (especially if the cat is hard of hearing and liable to be startled). Provide Puss with a refuge on a bookshelf or windowsill and make sure he can reach it, but junior can't. Most cats retreat to a safe place rather than scratch or bite their owner's boisterous 'kitten'. Teach junior how to interpret cat-talk (this can be great fun); hissing or tail swishing means 'leave me alone', but purring and head-butting means "carry on, I like this". If junior learns to respect Puss and not to pester him, they should get along just fine. Make sure junior learns to wash hands before mealtimes - as the saying goes "cats look clean, but they're actually covered in cat spit".

In the event that your child does get scratched by the family cat, rather than punish the cat for misbehaving, the child should be comforted and told not to pester the cats when they didn't want to be fussed. After one or two incidents, the child will learn to respect the cats and not maul them or pester them when they try to move out of reach.

Many of the above considerations can be adapted for situations where children join a household through marriage (i.e. step-children), fostering, or adoption. In most cases, common sense, patience and not panicking will save the day!

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**TALE: I sat my baby on the porch and the cats came swarming up to him.**

**FACTS:** The cats want to sniff the new arrival to establish who s/he is. Cats have scent glands around their cheeks so they may try to sniff the baby's face. Having satisfied their curiosity, they are not attacking him, nor are they trying to lie on the child's face! If possible, let the cat(s) satisfy their curiosity - that way they will pay much less attention to the baby in the future.

**NOTES:** *Some cats even try to clean spilt milk/vomit from the baby's face - either attracted to the milk or treating your baby as an over-sized kitten.*

## **A LIFE-LONG FRIENDSHIP**

Introduced carefully and taught to respect each other should result in a happy cat and well-adjusted youngster who will remain companions for many years.

## **THE CASE OF THE ABANDONED BABY ATTACKED BY STRAY CATS**

This footnote is for the benefit of those worried by an apparent cat-attacks-baby horror story publicized on international news reports. Poor reporting of the facts of the case led to shelters being contacted by worried parents who believed that their cat(s) might harm a newborn. The case is not comparable to the home situation.

In May 2001, a new-born baby abandoned in a rubbish skip was apparently attacked by stray cats before a man saved her in Malaysia. The baby girl was still attached to the umbilical cord when she was discovered wrapped in a cloth and placed in a plastic bag in a dumpster in Kuala Lumpur. Police saw stray cats near to the skip and found scratches all over the baby's body when they arrived at the scene. The baby has been taken to hospital and found to be healthy and the parents were being sought.

The important facts follow. The baby was new-born and therefore would smell of blood. The cats (which were wild, not pets) would have been attracted to the smell of blood and being unuse to humans, would not have viewed the infant as a family member. This is not comparable to the interaction of domestic house cats with babies in their family. The cats were feral and not accustomed to people as "family" so they would have viewed a helpless discarded infant as prey rather than a family member, especially as it had been placed in a rubbish skip where they normally found household scraps. Also, the report referred to scratches rather than bite wounds, so it is possible that the cats were investigating the find.

The case is not unusual, and the cats should not be blamed. A few days earlier Malaysian police in Selangor found the remains of a newborn baby; it had been buried in a shallow grave and dug up and partially eaten by stray dogs. Once again, this is not comparable to the domestic situation since the dogs were wild animals unaccustomed to human company.