

Cats and Babies/Children

What can I do to make the adjustment easier on my cat?

(Information adapted from Dumb Friends League)

Sounds and Smells

There are several things you can do to start introducing the smells and sounds of a baby to your house before they arrives. The most important thing to do is to make it a positive experience and introduce new things slowly. This can be done with treats, praise, or a favorite toy.

Start with a CD of baby sounds (or use YouTube to find videos). Turn the volume down low and hit play. How does your pet react? Are they curious? Scared? Nervous? Indifferent? Reward your pet if they calmly accept the new sounds, and ignore any behavior you don't want. It is important to do this every day until the baby arrives to allow your pet to adjust to the new noises that will be in the house.

Next, you want to let your cat get familiar with the smells of a baby. Bring out the diapers, wipes, and other supplies that you will be using. Let your pet smell the items while you reward them. When the baby arrives, have your spouse bring home something the baby wore at the hospital. Put that item in your pet's favorite spot to allow them to adjust to the smell before you bring the baby home.

Finally, if you have a family or friend who has a baby, invite them over. This is a great way to introduce pets to the extra excitement that will happen when the baby comes home.

Environment

You'll want to decorate the nursery and rearrange any furniture before the baby arrives. Let your pet explore all areas and new items. If you plan to block off the baby's room or other areas, one way that you can do it is with a screen door. The most important thing you can do is to give your pet a place to go where they can retreat when they need a break. Place a water bowl, bed, and other familiar items in the area so your pet knows this is their place. Make sure you can block off or shut the door when you need to, and work with your pet early so they know that it is a positive place to go and being confined there is not a punishment.

Routine

Create a routine for your pet and stick with it. Start this routine early too. For example, block off one hour each night that is just for your pet. This can be time spent relaxing in the safe room or another favorite activity. Start this routine before the baby arrives and then stick with it once they arrive. If you'll be changing your pet's feeding schedule, start this before the baby too. Pets rely on routine, and this will help them adjust.

Rules and Manners

Working on basic manners before the baby arrives will not only make your life easier, but it will help bond you with your pet. If your pet likes to jump in your lap or paws on people for attention, you can work with them to do it only when you give permission. The same goes for attention. Don't reward your pet when they are crying, pawing, etc. for it. Setting these rules for your pet will help keep you and your baby safe when they come home.

Another thing to keep in mind is how you use your voice. If you are always saying "no," "off," "don't," etc., your pet will start to associate the baby with negative feelings. Stay positive and reward your pet for calm behavior around the baby. To keep a positive relationship between the baby and your pet, do activities together, like spending time on the couch relaxing.

For another resource on what you can do to get your cat ready for the new baby, please visit <https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/cat-care/cats-and-babies>.

Can my cat be trained?

Like dogs, you can train your cat to follow basic commands. It can take time to get your cat to listen to you, but with the right treats and enough time, you too can have a cat that sits on command. To learn how to start, visit <https://www.bestfriends.org/resources/cats/clicker-training> and <http://www.adventurecats.org/backcountry-basics/how-to-clicker-train-a-cat/>.

How can I tell what my cat is thinking?

(Information from DCHS)]

Cats use a variety of signals (body postures, facial expressions, and vocalizations) to convey their message and avoid unwelcome confrontations. By learning how to decipher these feline postures, you can deepen the bonds of affection with your cats as well as prevent misunderstandings and potential aggression. But for many of us, cat lingo feels like a foreign language, difficult to understand and still harder to decipher. Here, animal behaviorists help us interpret kitty's cues and vocalizations.

Tummy Display

Feline body language is more nuanced than that of dogs, says Karen Sueda, DVM, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. "Part of the problem arises when people take their knowledge of dogs and apply it to cats," says Sueda. Have you ever wondered, for example, why your cat's seemingly flirtatious behavior of rolling over to expose its belly may be met with overt aggression when you try to stroke it?

When your cat is content and relaxed, she may stretch out and roll over. But in other situations, when a cat feels cornered and cannot escape, this pose -- followed by fully extended claws and sharp teeth -- may be highly defensive, indicating that she is prepared to fight, says Pam Johnson-Bennett, a

Certified Animal Behavior Consultant in Nashville, Tenn. As with other feline-human interactions, it is important to learn what your cat prefers.

The Fluttering Blink/Soft Eyes

When a cat greets another cat or a person with slow, languid blinks, it's communicating affection. Why? Because in the feline world, closing one's eyes in the presence of another is the ultimate sign of trust. By blinking slowly at your cat, you are communicating that you are aware of its presence and pose no threat. So the next time your cat blinks at you, try returning the gesture.

Classic Halloween Pose

One of the most accurate barometers of a cat's mood is its tail. When held high, it communicates confidence. Curled around another cat's tail or human legs, it signals friendliness. And tucked below or between the legs, it signals insecurity or anxiousness.

The upright bottle-brush tail is an unequivocal sign that your cat is feeling threatened. When combined with the arched back, upright hair along the spine, and unsheathed claws, the stance is a dead giveaway that you should back off, Sueda says.

The Direct Stare

Although people can use direct eye contact to show affection, most cats find it threatening. That's why in social settings, a cat usually gravitates toward the one person in the room who is trying to ignore it.

The more fearful a cat becomes, the wider its pupils expand, says Myrna Milani, DVM, an animal behaviorist at Tipping Point Animal Behavior Consulting Services in Charlestown, N.H. When dilated, the pupils take in as much visual information as possible. This bug-eyed, saucer look signals that a cat is very frightened and wants to retreat.

In an aroused or angry cat, the pupils may become narrowed or constricted to focus more effectively on detail. But cats' eyes also respond to ambient lighting, Sueda says, so it's important to observe the body language as a whole and not single out any one element.

Once a cat realizes that he is being watched, he may stop what he is doing and assess the situation.

I'm Going to Get You

Even the most mild-mannered cat may retaliate if feeling threatened or aroused by too much play or petting. "Cats are stimulus-driven predators by nature," Milani says. So when they see something move (whether a mouse, cat toy, or human hand), they are hardwired to pursue it. Closer and closer, they inch forward until they reach arousal threshold. Then they pounce and kill. If the prey

happens to be your hand, the wisest thing to do, Milani says, is to freeze. That stop-action will interrupt this inbred stalking pattern.

When you see these telltale warning signs: dilated pupils, low twitching tail, and flattened ears, your cat is telling you, in the only way it can, to back off. "That is not a time to get in its face and do 'the nice kitty' thing," Milani says. "And don't add to the problem by stroking it, especially if the cat is in defensive mode."

Audio Cues

Cats may have adapted their meows to manipulate people in order to get their needs met. "Cats don't do much meowing to other cats," says Sueda, calling meows "an attention-getting device" to express greetings, approval, demands for food, and more. Learn the nuances of your cat's vocabulary so you can detect the difference between a plea for dinner and an urgent cry for help. For instance:

1. Purring usually signals contentment and may also be a comfort-seeking behavior when the cat is recovering from illness or close to death.
2. High-pitched gurgling or chatting indicates friendliness.
3. Growling, hissing, or spitting are emphatic warnings to stay away -- at least until the cat has calmed down.
4. Caterwauling is a very loud, guttural sound that cats (especially males that have not been neutered) make when threatened by other cats. This sound is common in deaf cats.

Still, every cat is unique. "I always tell clients that nobody knows your cat better than you do," Milani says.

How can I keep my cat stress-free?

(Information from DCH and adapted from HSUS.org)

Once you can check off each of the four main steps below, your cat should be feeling relaxed and pleased with life.

Play with your cat

Since physical activity can reduce stress, playing with your cat for 10 to 15 minutes twice a day may help both of you feel more relaxed. Here are some tips:

1. Wind down the play in the last couple of minutes so your cat can calm down, and always end by giving your cat a treat or a meal.
2. Set aside a couple of special toys for your play time, then put them away for later.
3. To keep toys interesting, rotate them every few days.

Experiment with games. Here are a few tried and true ways to play with your cat to get you started:

1. Chase: The best type of interactive toy is a fishing-rod toy that has a 3-foot rod attached to a 3-foot string that has a couple of feathers at the end of it. Cats love to grab and pounce on these feathers as you move them around. Some cats also enjoy a cat laser light. Cats usually love these toys because they get to chase "prey." When playing with your cat, try to simulate the cats hunting of prey as best as possible. Prey slinks, stops, hides, makes sudden movements, and moves away from the cat.
2. Fetch: Some cats are like dogs; they love chasing treats or dry food and then returning for more.
3. Rolling: cats adore chasing balls made out of aluminum foil or other material, the rings from beverage bottles, or catnip mice.
4. Catnip toys: Most adult cats love catnip. Buy some high quality catnip and rub it on the cat's existing toys or the scratching post, put some on the floor, or stuff some in a sock and tie the end.

Make your home interesting

Boredom can cause stress, so give your cat interesting or fun things to do on her own. Try these:

1. Scratching posts: The best posts are at least 3 feet high, sturdy, and made of sisal (a rope material). Place the post in a prominent location that's easy to get at. Since cats like to scratch while playing, encourage yours to use the post by playing with her near it. Put some catnip on the post, too.
2. Hidden food: Cats love to find hidden food. Leave out treat balls, which are plastic balls with holes; once you put treats in and put the ball down, your cat will learn to move the ball to make the treats fall out the holes. You can make your own treat ball by sealing the ends of a paper towel roll and poking holes in it.
3. New things to play with and investigate: Cats love to play with paper bags (cut off the handles), cardboard boxes, aluminum foil balls, and crinkly wrapping paper.
4. Catnip: Most adult cats love catnip. Buy some high quality catnip and rub it on the cat's existing toys or the scratching post, put some on the floor, or stuff some in a sock and tie the end.

Make your home feel safe

For a cat, a safe home is essential to feeling happy and calm. The following things will make your home a refuge:

1. Hiding places: Cats need to have safe hiding spaces throughout the home. Here are a few options: cat carriers, cardboard boxes, space in closets or towels draped over chairs, cat trees, or soft tents (sold in pet-supply stores).
2. High resting spaces: Cats often seek security in high spaces where they can observe the home environment. Cat trees are the ideal high resting space, but you can also make a safe place for the cat in your home by clearing space on book shelves, desks, windowsills, and maybe adding a cat perch to the wall.
3. Calming products: Various products release scents in the air (that we can't smell) or natural chemicals that can calm stressed cats. They include Comfort Zone Feliway Plug-In Diffuser; L-

theanine, a chewable supplement that is clinically proven to reduce cats' stress levels; and flower remedies, such as Bach's Rescue Remedy.

4. If it's a multi-cat household, make sure there are enough resources for everyone: Provide multiple litter boxes and multiple food and water bowls, many high resting and hiding spaces, as well as individual attention and interactive play time with each cat.

Maintain the Routine

A change in your cat's eating, resting, or play routine caused by something like a new work schedule, a vacation, or a new baby in the home can really make your cat nervous and insecure. If you must change your cat's routine, try these three tips to make it easier on her:

1. If you know your cat's routine is going to be changed, help your cat adjust by gradually shifting to the new schedule beforehand.
2. Make sure your cat has lots of play time and interesting things to do as she gets used to the new schedule.
3. If the change is short-term, such as a vacation, jump back to the old schedule as soon as possible when you return.
4. If the change is long-term, make sure the new routine is consistent so your cat can rely on it. If it's work-related, try to leave and return home at the same time. If your new baby's needs make the old play time impossible, schedule the new play time at the same time every day.

How can I teach my kitten to play nice?

(Information from DCHS and adapted from Dumb Friends League)

A kitten's life is all about play, and play is all about prey. Soon after they open their eyes and hoist themselves up on their teeny paws, kittens start to play. But if you look closely, you'll notice that you have an itty-bitty hunter in your house.

Every race down the hallway, every pounce from behind a door, every swat and nip is a display of a kitten's hunting skills, instincts that are just as strong in today's housecat as they were in her ancestors thousands of years ago. To a kitten, everything, and we mean everything, in the house is potential prey, including you.

Learning to play nice

A kitten's first playmates are his mother and littermates, and from them he learns how to inhibit his bite. A kitten that is separated from their family too early may not have learned that lesson well enough and won't know when to stop. Acceptable behavior can quickly escalate.

In addition, if people use their hands and/or feet instead of toys to play with a young kitten, the kitten may learn that rough play is okay. In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable.

If playing with your kitten evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling in a matter of seconds, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first-aid kit.

1. Don't let your kitten play with your hands or feet (or any other body part). This sends the wrong message.
2. Use a toy when playing with them. Drag a toy, preferably a fishing pole-type toy that keeps your hands from kitty's mouth and claws, along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy for them to chase. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again.
3. Give your kitten something to wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about their size, so they can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with their back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target.
4. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when they want to play roughly—and be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as they accept the toy.
5. Don't hit or yell at your kitten when they nip or pounce. This will only make them fearful of you and they may start to avoid you. The idea is to train them, not punish them.

Discouraging "bad" behavior

Playing is not bad behavior, but you do have to set the rules for your kitten: no biting. Everyone in the household has to be on the same page, too; your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with dad but not with the baby. Equip yourself with the right training tools: toys, toys, toys!

A gnawing problem

As we said, you shouldn't let your kitten play with your body parts. But if you're petting them and they start gnawing on you, immediately say "no" and carefully take your hands away. Give them a toy to play with instead, but be sure they are not gnawing on you when you give them a toy or they'll think they are being rewarded for gnawing. Don't try to pet them again until they are tuckered out and no longer tempted to "kill" your hand.

You can also make your hands unattractive to your kitten by putting a bad-tasting, but harmless, substance on them, like Bitter Apple or Tabasco sauce. A kitten will catch on quickly.

Gimmie that!

Kittens always seem to want to play with whatever you're using—knitting needles, pencil, telephone antenna. If yours starts "attacking" your utensils, sharply say "no" to disrupt their behavior. Then give them one of their own toys. Be sure they are not attacking when you give them a toy or they will think they are being rewarded for biting.

On the hunt

Kittens also like to "hunt" you while you're walking around. They'll jump out from behind a door or under a chair and pounce on your ankles. If they don't pounce, praise them with "Good kitty." If they do pounce, use your sharp "uh-uh" to distract them and interrupt their behavior and offer them an acceptable toy. Be sure they are not pouncing on you when you provide the toy or they will think they are being rewarded for bad behavior.

Pay no attention

Withdraw attention when your kitten doesn't get the message. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't work, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention.

The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for them to calm down. If you pick them up to put them in another room, then you're rewarding them by touching them, so you should always be the one to leave the room.

Remember, your kitten wants to play with you, not just toys, so be sure to set aside time for regular, serious, and safe play sessions.

For more information on behavior issues in cats, please visit

<https://www.bestfriends.org/resources/cats/cat-behavior-problems-prevention>

How do I teach my child to interact with my cat as they grow up?

(Information from DCHS)

Cats and kittens can be great companions for children, but younger kids need supervision and encouragement for the interaction to be a positive one. Here are some things to keep in mind:

1. Never try to force the interaction and never try to hold a cat that does not want to be held. This will very often lead to a scratch or bite.
2. If the cat tolerates being held, have your child sit down whenever they want to hold the cat and make sure the cat's backend is always supported. Keep in mind that many cats do not like to be held but do enjoy sitting next to a lap. Try having your child give the cat treats by placing them in their open palm and offering them to the cat. Yummy treats will help the cat make good associations with your kid.
3. It is important to let the cat approach the child, rather than vice versa. Some cats are scared or intimidated by small children.
4. Most cats don't like to be bothered while they are eating and definitely should not be bothered while using the litter box.
5. Remember to play with toys that keep the cat at a distance from you. Children often are not able to tell when the cat is about to go after their fingers or toes or mistake them for toys, so it's

better to keep the cat at a safe distance. Using wand toys or laser pointers are fun for both the kid and the cat!

6. Never try to pull or pick up a cat by her tail, legs, head or ears. Teach your child to pet lightly and let the cat walk away when it wants to.
7. You should always have a place where the cat can get away from the child (or dog, or adult, or vacuum, or whatever). This could be a room, a high perch, the basement, etc. A cat will feel much more secure knowing that they have a 'safe haven'. If a cat walks away or hides, make sure the child knows to leave the cat alone and not go after it.

As with any other pet, no matter how tolerant the cat is, never leave a small child unattended with a cat.

How can I protect my baby from my cat's nails?

The best way to protect your child is to keep your cat's nails trimmed. This can be done at your vet or at home. Another solution is to try soft paws, which are nail caps that go on the cat's nails. For more information, check out www.softpaws.com.

I'm expecting my baby, but my cat is aggressive. What can I do so I can keep my baby safe and keep my cat?

There are several reasons behind why your cat is aggressive. Please visit <https://bestfriends.org/resources/aggression-cats-toward-people> for more information, and/or talk to your veterinarian to figure out if there is a medical reason behind your cat's aggression.

For more information on babies, children, and cats, please check out

<http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?c=19+1278&aid=627>