



Children and Cats: Important Information for Parents

Courtesy of Dumb Friends League 2014

Growing up with a cat can be a great thing for a child. A pet cat can help build your child's self-esteem, help them learn a lot about responsibility, and teach them about empathy for other living things. However, there are a few important things to keep in mind before you bring home your new cat.

Selecting a Cat

Cats Under 2 years of age

- Time and energy: Young cats require a lot of time, patience and supervision.
- Safety: Kittens especially, may become frightened or even injured by a well-meaning, curious child who wants to pick him up, hug him, or explore his body by pulling on his tail or ears. They may learn to act aggressively with your child out of fear of being injured.
- Rough play: Young cats have sharp teeth and claws which they don't really know how to use appropriately yet. They may accidentally injure a small child. All interactions between your child and young cat need to be closely supervised in order to minimize the chances of either being injured.

Over 2 years of age

- Time and energy: Older cats require less time once they've adjusted to your family and household routine.
- Safety: You can better gauge how hardy and tolerant an older cat will be of a child's enthusiasm. Older cats who have lived with young kids before will be much more tolerant of a little too-enthusiastic loving.

As a general rule, if your child is under six years old, it's best to adopt a cat that's over two years old.

Starting Off Right

Below are some guidelines to help you start off on the right foot. Remember to always supervise children with your new cat.

- Holding: Have your child sit down whenever he wants to hold the cat. Keep in mind that some cats do not like to be held, but will sit next to you and your child, especially if offered treats or petting. Have your child sit in your lap and **let the cat approach both of you**. This way you can keep your child from getting "carried away" with pats that are too rough and allows your cat to be the one in control of meeting this new person.

- **Petting:** Petting is a great way for your cat to make positive associations with your child. Teach your child to pet lightly, preferably not on the head, feet, tail, or belly, and that the cat should always be allowed to leave when it feels like it.
- **Treats:** Treats are another great way for your cat to make good associations with your child. Have your child place the treat in an open palm, rather than holding it in his fingers. If your cat is afraid of your child, have them toss a few treats to them so the cat learns that your child is not scary and equals good things.
- **Play:** Playing is a great way for your child and cat to positively interact with each other. Teach your child to play with your cat using toys, instead of hands, by either throwing a toy, like a mouse or ball, or by dangling a fishing pole toy. Also teach your child to be gentle and quiet while playing with your cat and to let your cat leave when **they** are done playing.

Cats and Babies

Cats and babies can be great together if the proper precautions are taken. A new baby means major life changes for everyone in the family and cats do not deal well with change. Eventually everyone will settle in and your baby will grow up with the advantage of having the unconditional love and devotion of a feline friend, confidant, protector, and playmate. Please see our Handout, "Bringing Home Baby," for more information on cats and babies.

Remember to be patient.

Your new cat may take some time to feel comfortable around your child. Your cat also needs to learn which behaviors on his part are appropriate and which are not. Cats are territorial animals and will usually take longer than dogs to become comfortable in a new place. Until your cat is comfortable, always supervise time they spend with your kids, and remind your children that the new kitty is scared and still getting used to their new family.

IMPORTANT!

Punishing your cat or kitten for inappropriate behavior will not help and is likely to make matters worse. If he learns that being around children always results in bad things happening to him, he may become defensive or aggressive in their presence. Once that association it is very difficult to change or eliminate.

If your cat is growling, hissing, or biting at your child for any reason, the situation needs IMMEDIATE attention.