

SAFE AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

BETWEEN CATS AND CHILDREN

Pet ownership can be a really rewarding experience for children as they grow up. Many will benefit greatly from having a furry feline companion to interact with and to help look after. However, it's really important that both cat and child are comfortable in each other's presence and that the child is safe around the cat. A stressed and unhappy cat is more likely to behave aggressively (in order to protect themselves against perceived threats), and as a result could injure a child.

Equally, the cat may display other behaviours that can be problematic for owners to manage, for example, the cat might go missing for periods of time or begin house soiling.

This guide is designed to provide you with some simple and effective advice in order to encourage safe and positive relationships between cats and children, so that both parties are happy and comfortable in each other's presence.

Selecting a cat:

What type of cat may be more suited to live with young children?

Each cat is an individual, having their own likes and dislikes. It can often be the case that some will enjoy certain things that others may find stressful. For example, a very friendly, bold cat may cope much better in a family with young children, enjoying (or at least tolerating well) a lively and sometimes unpredictable household. However, a more timid and/or less friendly cat may find the same household very stressful to live in.

It is therefore really important to select a cat that has the right temperament or personality to help them to have a good quality of life if living with young children. We suggest you aim to select a cat that:-

- Is friendly and confident.
- Does not appear fearful or panicked when meeting the children for the first time (e.g. in the rehoming centre).
- Seems relatively relaxed, laid back and generally unfazed by changes in their environment.
- Enjoys physical contact and stroking and is relatively tolerant of being handled.

- Has a history of happily living with young children in their previous home or is a young kitten that also has the above qualities.

Settling your new cat in to the home

Upon adopting your new cat, we suggest that you initially place them into a quiet room by themselves, containing all the resources they need. The cat should ideally be allowed to settle in this room for at least a few days before they are introduced to the rest of the house. If the cat appears a little shy at first, it's also a very good idea to wait until they seem more confident and relaxed, before they are introduced to any children. For more information see [How to settle your new cat in to the home](#).

When your cat appears to be fully settled in to their room and is comfortable and happily approaching you, it is a good idea to initially introduce them to the rest of the home at a time when it is quiet and there are no children about. In this way the cat is less likely to be overwhelmed with too much going on at once. You may want to repeat this a few times before they are given unrestricted access to the whole house and there are children about.

Using Feliway® Classic

Feliway® Classic is a product that contains a synthetic copy of a naturally occurring pheromone that cats will leave behind when they rub areas of their face (where their scent glands are located) against people, furniture, doorways, and other prominent objects both inside the home as well as outdoors.

It is thought that these pheromones enable the environment to feel more familiar to the cat, helping them to feel less anxious and more reassured. Feliway® Classic can be used in a plug-in diffuser so that a continuous amount of the pheromone is released into the environment. When you are initially settling your new cat into their room, you may want to use a diffuser with Feliway® Classic in which may help them to feel comfortable more quickly.

Ideally, place the diffuser in the room and turn it on a few hours before you bring your cat home, so that the pheromones are already within the environment when they arrive. It may also be a good idea to place a few Feliway® diffusers in different parts of the home to help the cat to feel more comfortable when given access to these areas too.

Feliway® can also be used on an ongoing basis if this appears to be beneficial to the cat.

How to place your cat's resources around the home

It's a great idea to provide your cat with lots of places they can rest and perch that are out of reach of the child; for example, a big free-standing cat tree or a cat bed placed on a shelf or on top of a cupboard are ideal.

In addition, using baby gates or similar so that your cat can access an area that is quiet and 'child free' is also a great way to help them to cope sharing a house with a curious and active young child. It's a particularly good idea to place your cat's key resources such as food, water and litter trays in these quiet 'child free' areas. This will also ensure your child isn't tempted to eat any of the cat's food or touch a dirty litter tray.

If your cat knows they can get away from the child if they want to, as well as access everything they need without being disturbed, they are much more likely to feel relaxed and comfortable around the child in general.

Introducing your cat to your child for the first time

It's really important that children learn from the very beginning how to safely and respectfully interact with cats. The more calm, gentle and careful the child is around the cat, the more relaxed and less likely to bite or scratch the cat will be. First impressions are really important, and in order to make sure your cat has a positive first encounter with the child, we suggest you follow the tips below:

- Encourage the child to sit down and be still, or otherwise place him or her in a play pen or behind a child safety gate. You may also want to distract the child with a toy, book, or TV programme so that he or she is less likely to be very focused on the cat.
- Have cat treats handy and be ready to pick the child up if he or she becomes over excited or tries to grab towards the cat.
- Encourage the cat to approach near to the child, at a short distance away and reward your cat with treats.
- Allow the cat to approach and sniff the child if it wants to (and if both child and cat appear to be comfortable) but discourage the child from touching the cat initially. It's important the cat is able to gently get used to the child at their own pace, without being overwhelmed, and for the child to learn that he or she should not automatically expect to touch the cat whenever it is nearby.

How to teach your child to interact with the cat safely

- When the cat appears to be relaxed and comfortable around the child (this might happen in a matter of minutes, or may take weeks or even longer, depending on the individual), you can start to teach your child how to interact safely with the cat. During this process, it's always a good idea to supervise the cat and child when together.
- Depending on the age of the child, you can start to teach him or her how and where to touch the cat to ensure the cat feels comfortable and enjoys the interaction. The child should be encouraged to mainly touch the cat around its chin, cheeks and in between its ears, and avoid touching the cat's tail and tummy (even though these areas may be particularly enticing for the child!).
- In addition, it's a great idea to help your child to be able to spot the signs that the cat is enjoying the interaction, and when it has had enough or is feeling uncomfortable. This is very useful from a safety point of view as your child will be much less likely to be bitten or scratched if they know where to touch the cat and also when to stop.
- Never pick the cat up and force them to be handled by the child – they may find this quite stressful and should always be able to choose whether to interact with the child or not.
- It's also a great idea to encourage your child to spend time with the cat in other ways that don't involve direct handling, such as play or some basic training.

For more information on the above, please see our advice sheets:-

[How to interact with your cat to create a lasting bond, keep them happy and avoid being scratched or bitten.](#)

[Playing with your cat.](#)

[Basic training you can do with your cat to improve their welfare.](#)

Helping your cat to adjust to the arrival of a new baby

The addition of a new small person into the home can be a very exciting time. However, from your cat's perspective it can also cause a lot of disruption in the form of new sounds and smells (coming from the baby), changes in your routine, the moving of furniture and the arrival of new objects such as toys, prams and cots. For some confident and inquisitive cats, this can be a very interesting and intriguing time, but for others it can cause them stress and anxiety as they might not feel as 'in control' of their surroundings as usual.

Most cats tend to be creatures of habit and appreciate an amount of consistency and predictability. They are generally quite sensitive to noise, sudden changes in the environment, and certain types of handling that they aren't accustomed to. It is therefore always advisable to gradually help prepare your cat in advance of the new baby's arrival, so that it is much less of a 'shock' when the baby appears. It's also important to plan how you will manage a young child around your cat, particularly as he or she starts to become more mobile and active.

- Your daily routine will probably change quite drastically when the baby arrives. If you can anticipate what is likely to change, and slowly introduce some of these changes in advance of baby arriving, this may help your cat to feel much less overwhelmed. Things that might change when your baby arrives include:
 - The person that feeds the cat, where and at what times.
 - The person that plays and interacts with the cat the most, at what times and how long for.
 - The location of the cat's key resources such as food, water, litter trays, beds, scratching posts and toys are positioned.
 - The parts of the house your cat will or won't have access to.
- You can also gradually introduce your cat to various new objects associated with the baby (e.g. toys and prams) so that by the time the baby arrives, these items are already familiar to the cat. Each time you introduce a new object into the house, place it in a 'neutral' area (i.e. not directly near the cat's important resources such as food bowls or litter trays). Leave some of your cat's favourite treats on or around the new item, and then let your cat explore it in their own time. Providing several Feliway® diffusers around the house (see section above) or spraying the new items with a few squirts of Feliway® from a bottle can also be a good idea. If there are items intended for the baby that you don't want your cat to get used to sitting on or sleeping in (such as a crib or pushchair) then it is a good idea to place these out of reach of your cat or fill them with other items so that your cat cannot easily jump up onto them.
- You can also play your cat recordings of the various sounds babies make (e.g. giggling, crying, calling and squealing) very quietly at first, and then gently increasing the volume over time so that your cat can slowly and gradually get used to these different noises before the baby arrives. Each time you play the recordings, you can also distract/reward your cat with a few treats.
- If mum and baby are likely to spend a few days in hospital before coming home, it may be a good idea to take a small item that has your baby's smell on it, and to place this within the home for your cat to sniff and investigate in their own time. This way your cat can start to familiarise itself with the baby before they actually meet.

- When you bring your baby home, it's a good idea to just simply let the cat decide whether they want to be near the child or not, and not to force them to meet in close proximity. Depending on the individual, the cat may either want to investigate the child straight away, or be much more cautious and wary so let your cat go at their own pace.
- For safety reasons, it's a very good idea to not leave the baby and cat together unattended.

How can I tell if my cat is, or is not, coping well living with children?

If your cat is adjusting well to living with a child or baby, you should expect:-

- To see no obvious changes to their normal routines.
- The cat to continue to eat, sleep, drink, groom and use their litter tray as normal.
- The cat to appear relaxed and comfortable around the house, including when they are in proximity of the child.

The following are potential behaviours that indicate your cat may be struggling to cope:

- Any noticeable change in their usual behaviour patterns.
- A reluctance to come into the house from outside.
- Avoiding being in the house at certain times of day (for example in the mornings and afternoon/evening when the children are more likely to be inside), or at least regularly avoid certain parts of the house (such as the kitchen or children's play areas).
- Frequent hiding when in the house (i.e. under the bed, on top of a wardrobe, under a chest of draws etc.).
- Frequent crouched or tense posture when in the home.
- Frequent rotation of the ears backwards or flattening of the ears downwards.
- Very dilated pupils and large round eyes.
- Toileting outside of the litter tray (for example behind the sofa, under or on the bed).
- Spraying on furniture and other items around the house.
- Scratching on the furniture.
- Aggressive behaviour (for example hissing, growling, biting or scratching) directed towards humans.
- Aggressive behaviour (for example hissing, growling, biting or scratching) directed towards other animals in the house.
- An increased dependency on humans (i.e. constant attempts made to interact with you).
- Withdrawal from human contact (i.e. the cat is no longer interested in interacting with you).
- Unresponsiveness to things going on around them (e.g. the cat no longer reacts to various sounds or movements).
- A frequent fixed, downwards gaze towards the floor.
- Excessive meowing.
- Excessive grooming.
- Repeated pacing (or other repetitive behaviours) when in the house.
- Rapid, frequent grooming that usually lasts around five seconds and which starts and stops quite suddenly.
- Frequent head shaking.

TOP TIP:

For more information on reading your cat's body language and understanding what emotions they may be experiencing, see [Reading cat body language – a basic guide](#)



Cat showing tense posture: hunched body, eyes are wide and dilated, limbs tucked under body

- Rippling/twitching of the back.
- Vigorous swishing or thumping of the tail.

In addition, the cat may also display physical symptoms such as:

- Diarrhea.
- Vomiting.
- Pica (eating of non-food items such as cat litter or string).
- Poor appetite and under eating.
- Lethargy and increased sleeping.
- Excessive eating and drinking.
- Weight loss or weight gain.
- A poor coat condition (for example a dull looking coat containing scurf).
- Large bald patches on the coat or sore or scabbed areas caused by over grooming.
- Withholding of faeces and urine (i.e. a reduction in toileting frequency).
- Cat flu.
- Cystitis.
- A weakened immune system, which may exacerbate other underlying conditions, or slow the cat's recovery from illnesses.

If you have any concerns that your cat may not be coping well

In addition to the advice provided in this guide, you may also find it useful to read the following:-

[Reducing your cat's stress.](#)

[How to make your home cat-friendly and enriching for your cat.](#)

Please contact Battersea for further help and advice or alternatively, you may want to seek professional advice from a suitably qualified pet behaviour counsellor who should be able to provide more detailed support, specific to your cat and your circumstances. Please see our advice sheet [How to find a good cat behaviourist.](#)