



FACTSHEET

Babies, children, and cats

Sadly, many people think if they are having a baby they must give up their cat/s. This is not only distressing for the cat/s and the new parents, but unnecessary. Cats and babies can exist happily and healthily together in the one family.

A prevailing myth is that pregnant women are at risk from toxoplasmosis from cats. Toxoplasmosis is best avoided at all times and while it is true that there are additional risks to pregnant women, the reality is that infection via cats is unlikely – it's much more likely to come from consuming unwashed vegetables or raw/undercooked meat, or from gardening.

Toxoplasmosis is not common in adult cats. If a cat has it, the infection will be shed through the faeces. Therefore, cross contamination can be prevented by using gloves to change the litter tray, or better still, have someone else do this task. For more information see *our factsheet on Toxoplasmosis*.

Make sure you continue regular flea and worm treatment for your cat. A vet health check of your cat before you bring your new baby home will give you further reassurance.

Ringworm can be spread between pets and children, but this is most likely when the children are older and attending childcare or school, and it is more likely the transmission is from child to pet rather than the other way around. In any case, ringworm is easily treatable; for more information see *our factsheet on Ringworm*.

Cats like routine and a new baby will potentially upset a cat because of the changes to domestic activity and also because the cat might receive less attention. A great way to avoid your cat getting upset is to start preparing them for the arrival of your new baby a few weeks, or even months in advance. Before your baby's arrival, set up their room and set the new boundaries for your cat. If you don't want the cat to go into the baby's room once the baby is born, limit access as soon as the room is set up. Let the cat have a wander around and put their smell on things but then close the room off. A good idea is to place a screen door on the room so the cat can still see in but can't enter the room, this will be less stressful for the cat as they can still see everything that goes on in the room.

If you don't mind the cat going into the room once the baby is born, letting them walk around or even sleep in the room is a good way for the cat to get used to the new décor, sounds, and smells. It is also a good idea if you have lullaby mobiles or lights to have them playing occasionally so your cat gets used to these new sounds.

If you have friends with young children it's a good idea to let them visit more than usual so your cat gets used to the noise of children. This way they will be less spooked when the new baby arrives. Try to use baby soaps and detergents a few weeks before the baby comes home as well; this will help your cat get used to all the new smells of a new baby.

To keep your cat happy and feeling secure, it is important to try to maintain existing routines for the cat such as feeding times and try to make a little time each day to pat the cat or play with them and reassure them they are loved. If you are planning on changing feed times when the new baby arrives, gradually introduce the new feeding times in the weeks before the baby is due, so your cat gets used to the new routine.

Once your baby is born, but before they come home, it is helpful to bring home a baby blanket from the baby's cot for your cat to sniff; this will get the cat used to the baby's scent and help the cat to recognise the baby as a part of the family.

Babies or small children and pets should never be left alone unsupervised.

It is very important to be patient with your cat when introducing the new family member. Your cat will need time to establish familiarity with all the new things that come with a new baby. Praise your cat when the baby is around so they know being around you and the baby is a great experience. Don't become too stressed if your cat's behaviour is very different for a time once the baby has come home; your stress will stress your cat even more! To make your cat feel safer, make sure they have places to 'get away' if need be. Hiding places and perches high up will let your cat feel more secure if they feel threatened.

When your baby starts to crawl, make sure your cat's food, water bowl, litter tray, and toys are kept out of your baby's reach.

With supervision, you can gradually introduce your new baby to your cat. Babies and small children delight in the texture of a cat's fur and enjoy their meows and purrs; they are fascinated by whiskers, so be careful to stop the child from pulling the cat's whiskers or tail.

From the outset you can teach your child how to be gentle with a cat, and as they get older you can teach them about cat body language and when to leave cats alone (e.g. when the cat's ears are flattened, the tail is swishing, pupils dilated). If you're worried about your cat scratching you can trim their claws, though many cats are instinctively gentle with babies.

Children learn by example, so treating your cat with love and respect will teach your child these important values. Children also love getting involved with caring for pets and this in turn will help form a bond between your cat and your children.

Many baby toys will be appealing to cats – cats are not being naughty seeking to play with them and it won't help to scold the cat. Make sure your cat has enough toys of their own and disinfect any toys that have been shared by your cat!

There are many benefits for children growing up with pets, including improved communication and social skills, and the development of empathy. With good hygiene (washing hands after playing with the cat), good cat care (regular flea and worm treatments and vet checks) and proper supervision and guidance, the risks of cats and babies sharing a family home are minimal, and the rewards plentiful.

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