

CATS AND KIDS

Cats And Kids: Can They Live In Harmony?

If you are thinking about getting a cat for your family, first ask yourself why you are interested in getting a cat. Please do not get a cat for your children if you are not prepared and willing to be responsible for it for its entire life. While children can be taught to *share* in the responsibilities of care-taking for a pet, they should always be supervised and parents should be prepared to take over should the children “lose interest” in these responsibilities. Children may even feel resentful towards the family pet if they feel it is a “chore” to take care of it. Cats have needs that must be met daily (fresh food and water, a clean litter box, grooming, playtime) as well as medical needs you will be responsible for. If you are not willing to commit to this caretaking, then now may not be the best time for your family to get a pet – it is best to be realistic about your abilities to take on this responsibility, rather than adopting a pet that will end up returned or euthanized because it was a novelty.

Ground Rules

Before getting a cat, it is best to start talking to your child about how they need to treat a cat. A cat is not a toy, and children must be taught to ALWAYS handle any animal gently. A child could easily injure or even kill a cat (and especially a kitten) unintentionally. Some ground rules to set with children:

- **Pet and touch the cat gently**
- **Never squeeze the cat**
- **Do not grab the cat, poke at it, or pull its tail, legs or ears**
- **Be careful with kitty’s “sensitive areas” – belly, paws, tail**
- **Do not tease the cat**
- **Do not play rough with the cat or use hands for play**
- **Do not disturb a cat that is eating, sleeping or using the litter box**
- **Do not pick up a cat that is struggling to get away**
- **Leave the cat alone if it is acting agitated or trying to hide**
- **Never hit a cat for any reason**
- **Always treat your pet the way you would like to be treated (kindly)**

Supervision

Children should be supervised when interacting with a cat, *at least* until you feel comfortable with how they are getting along and that your child is respecting the “ground rules.”

Safe Spaces

Make sure that your cat has a place where it can “get away” if necessary. A cat tree will provide a cat with a high perch, where she can see what is going on around her, while allowing her to remove herself from a situation that is stressing her out. Kids should be taught that the cat tree is “off limits” to them, and when your cat is climbing up there, that is her way of letting the family know she is done playing. You can also use baby gates as a way to create “cat safe” spaces. Your cat will feel less stressed out knowing there are places she can escape to without being bothered.

Playtime

Playtime is important for every cat and is a good chance for your family to bond with your cat. Cats enjoy playtime that simulates a hunt and chase situation. There are many interactive toys that cats love – an interactive toy is one that you use *with* your cat, and often features a “fishing pole” with a toy attached to a string. These toys are good because they keep your hands away from the cat and easily simulate prey (like birds, mice and bugs) which is really fun for your cat. You will also want to leave out plenty of toys for your cat’s self-entertainment, and change toys regularly so they stay exciting for your cat. Make sure toys are safe for your cat and your children, and keep any toys with small removeable parts or string in a safe place and make sure they are only used with supervision.

Finally, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of not playing with your cat with hands. It may seem cute to wrestle with a kitten or make your cat chase your hands, but please consider – you are training your cat to attack people (including you). Cat bites and scratches can be serious, and a small child could easily be seriously scratched or bitten by a cat that has been trained to see hands as "prey." It also means that your cat has an antagonistic relationship with humans, and feels "on the defense" when approached by a well-meaning person. It is a very difficult habit to "un-train," so please only use your hands for petting your cat and only use toys for playing with your cat.

Claws: A Cat’s Self Defense Method

Few animals will purposely attack a person unless unnecessarily provoked to do so. Most cats will choose to retreat from a situation that is antagonizing them (for example, a curious toddler grabbing their tail). If they are given no choice, they may opt to defend themselves how they know best – with their claws. With proper supervision and training of your child, this will not become an issue. Some people feel tempted to consider declawing their cat to "protect their child." But declawed cats have a higher tendency to bite than non-declawed cats. This is because their main way of defending themselves has been taken away from them. We feel that cats with claws are the best choice for kids. The other thing you can do is make sure your cats claws are clipped regularly (once a month is great). This can be done at your veterinarian’s office, and you can learn to do it yourself as well.

Keeping your cat’s claws short will reduce any damage they may try to do with their paws. And don’t forget to get a scratching post for your cat too!

Delicate Kittens

A young kitten is very fragile. Their bones can be easily broken, and a well-meaning hug from an overzealous child can lead to severe injury and even death. All it takes is a few moments of unsupervised interaction, and a kitten can be seriously injured or dead. It’s a no-win situation - the kitten suffers; the child will have to deal with the guilt of their actions, when they may have had good intentions or just been overwhelmed with feelings of love for their pet. They may not yet understand that there is a limit to how many hugs a cat can withstand or that cats should not be squeezed. They also do not realize their strength.

Toddlers

Even with an adult cat, you will not want to leave your young child with your cat

without adult supervision. As toddlers, children are now able to inadvertently harm a cat by poking it, or with a sudden movement such as swinging around with a toy and accidentally hitting the cat with it. The other risk is that a sudden pull of the tail or fur, or

a child stepping on the cat could cause it to react aggressively out of pain, resulting in a scratch or bite. Teach your child that sudden movements or loud noises are scary to a cat. With guidance and supervision, your cat will not be a stressed out member of your family – and will feel secure interacting with your toddler.

Teaching Infants and Toddlers About Appropriate Interactions with Cats

The sooner you teach your child about how to handle the family cat(s), the better. As soon as your child becomes interested, you will want to begin supervised interactions with the cat. If you begin these exercises right away, your child will grow up with a better understanding of what cats like, knowing appropriate ways to handle cats and how to know when the cat is done with the interaction. Only pet the cat when kitty is in the mood – you don't want the cat to think he will be handled against his or her will, and associate that with your child. As well, children should be educated that petting and playtime are done only when the cat is willing. A good time to start is when your cat is nearby and your baby is in your lap. Repeating positive phrases, such as "We love the kitty" or "We always touch the kitty softly", guide your child's hands down the cat's back softly. If the child grabs at the cat's fur, calmly open his hand and say "No grabbing, grabbing hurts the kitty." At the first sign of irritation, such as head turns, ears back, or tail swishing, end the interaction. Let the cat leave if she wants to. Let your child know the cat has had enough and move on to another activity. Do not allow your child to grab the cat when it is leaving. When your child is old enough to start walking or crawling, do not allow her to chase your cat. Instead, if she wants to interact with the cat, sit with your child and try to call the cat to you. If the cat wants to come over, repeat the exercise described above. If the cat does not come over, explain to your child that the cat is not in the mood to play or be held, and switch to a different activity. Make sure that your child understands that when the cat walks away that it must be left alone. If your child is allowed to chase the cat, the cat may become fearful or defensively aggressive, and may try to swat or bite.

This information is courtesy of the San Francisco Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or catbehavior@sfspca.org.