

# Behaviour matters

## Learning to love – one of life's easiest lessons

**G**rowing up with cats is a wonderful experience. While our attachment to cats can take different roles, many people consider their cat as part of the family. Cats are often viewed as confidants by children who feel they can tell their cat anything, creating a strong bond between them. Certainly my black cat Gamble was my best friend as I was growing up and I have fond memories of him following me down to breakfast every morning without fail. Whether you are adding a new feline friend into your family or thinking of starting a family and wondering how your cat will find the newcomer, there are plenty of things you can do to make the transition go as smoothly as possible for all involved.

### Preparing your cat for a new arrival

In all the excitement of preparing for the arrival of a new baby, it can be easily overlooked to 'tell' your cat! As creatures of habit that thrive on routine, cats can find change stressful. Babies are accompanied with lots of new paraphernalia, such as toys, cots and prams, as well as a change in routine. While some of the behaviours cats show in response to the surprise arrival of an infant can appear as jealousy, rest assured that cats are not jealous of babies! Currently it is not thought that they are capable of the feeling of jealousy. Simply the novelty of the sights, sounds and smells can be unsettling for a cat who likes everything in their environment to be just so. ▶

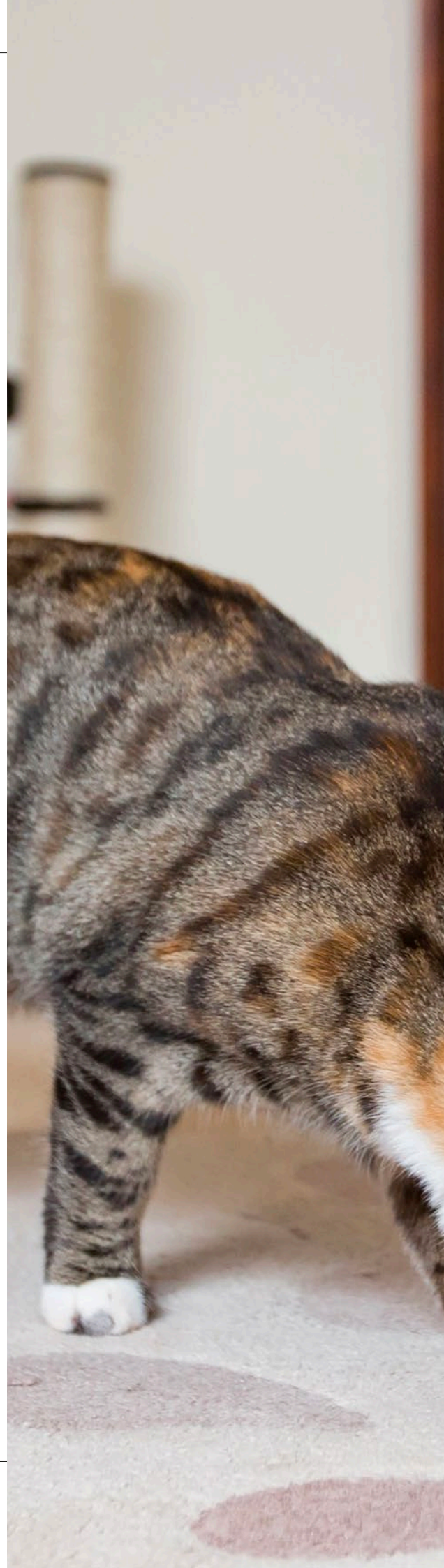
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*Teaching children ways to calmly interact with cats can help create a positive bond*



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▶ Starting preparations as early as possible will set your cat up to succeed. Gradually introducing new baby items to your cat can help ease them into the changes, allowing them to investigate them at their own pace. Prams and cots make very cosy places for cats to sleep, so to avoid temptation, it is best to keep these items away from your cat once they have had a good sniff! One of the key ways to help your cat adjust is to gradually get them used to baby crying sounds. This can be easily achieved by playing short clips very quietly and building up the time and volume at the cat's pace over time. There is a sound file and some instructions available at [www.cats.org.uk/baby](http://www.cats.org.uk/baby) Small treats can be used to reward calm behaviour and help your cat to form positive associations with the sound as well as any baby equipment.

### A place of tranquility and calm

Even cats that are comfortable around babies or children need a 'sanctuary room' with all their important resources inside so they have a safe, quiet retreat. A spare bedroom works well. Baby gates can be used so the room is out of bounds for babies and children, but easily accessible for the cat. Amending the environment to provide safe places out of reach of children can help cats feel safer as they can watch events taking place from an accessible high vantage point. Provide your cat with a high windowsill, cupboard top or add some cat shelves.

### Learning by example

Most young children have a natural affinity for animals, and this has been shown in various cultures around the world. Interactions with



babies and very young children need to be carefully managed as the soft fur can be very tempting to grab. As soon as they are able to understand, children can be taught to be kind and respectful with cats, including how to interact with them, stroke them gently and allow the cats to approach on their own terms. It's important to explain that cats like to be left alone when sleeping or eating and that they can become frightened when people shout, make sudden movements or try to grab them. Children can be taught to understand basic cat body language such as the classic tail up greeting as well as learning to interpret the signs of an unhappy cat – the swishing tail, ruffed-up fur or hissing – and avoid doing things that upset them.

Hugging is a natural behaviour for people (also commonly seen in great apes), but is not a normal behaviour for our pets. This situation is frequently misinterpreted by people as it looks very cute and appealing from our perspective. However, the difficulty is that cats are extremely subtle in their behaviour and signs that they are feeling uncomfortable or stressed – such as licking the nose, ears turned out to the side, turning

the head away, swallowing out of context, and dilated pupils – can be easily missed. Helping children to develop empathy and understand cats from the cat's perspective is very rewarding and helps to create the foundations for a positive bond. Cats Protection's Education team deliver fantastic talks to children and people of all ages to increase their understanding of cats' needs and learn about body language. Additionally there is a variety of useful resources at [www.cats.org.uk/education](http://www.cats.org.uk/education)

### Introducing cats to babies and children

Much like with introducing cats to other cats or dogs, it is imperative that this is done gradually at the cat's pace. Cats need to feel in control of their interactions and able to escape or watch from afar if necessary. Start as you mean to go on from day one. All children and cats are such individuals with unique personalities and therefore introductions need to be tailored to those involved. Children learn well from consistent, regular repetition and positive reinforcement for gentle interactions with the cat. Keep interactions short and sweet, so that it does not become overwhelming for your cat or your child does not become overexcited. Bribery in the form of small, tasty treats are an excellent way for your cat to form positive associations with your child.

● **By taking steps to prepare your cat and children properly from the start, you'll have happy children and a content cat, ultimately helping your children to become responsible and caring adults. For more information about #KidsAndKitties visit [www.cats.org.uk/cats-and-kids](http://www.cats.org.uk/cats-and-kids)**