



# Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

*Vicky Halls investigates whether kids are just for people who can't have cats*

**W**hen I was a little girl, I had a wonderful relationship with a Siamese called Jenny. She was a constant playmate and companion who gave me years of pleasure and taught me so much about loving and caring. This is the sort of experience that most parents would want for their child, but if this is something you are planning it does need some careful thought.

There is no absolute guarantee that all cats and children cohabit comfortably. If cats are brought up with children, they will often tolerate the unpredictable and boisterous behaviour that inevitably occurs far better than those exposed to them suddenly for the first time as adults. The character of the cat and the timing of the introduction are significant to ensure the relationship that is being created is beneficial for both parties.

## Introducing a cat into the family

When weighing up the pros and cons, parents need to accept that the majority, if not all, of the chore-based care will be carried out by them, no matter how many promises the children make prior to acquisition. A new kitten – and, to a lesser extent, adult cat – needs a great deal of commitment particularly in the early stages so the whole family has to play a role, even if it is agreeing to participate in regular playtime.

The choice of cat or kitten is important as there are definitely those individuals who are more 'family-friendly' than others. The ideal companion would be well socialised and confident, with an apparently endless tolerance of handling and affection. However, even with the most tolerant cats, it is the parents' role to teach a child to read the signs when a cat has had enough and always respect their need for time alone. In households where the children are unruly and occasionally

aggressive, it is probably wise to make the decision not to have a pet, at least for the time being. Some rehoming centres may advise against cats being adopted by households with young children, judging the noise, disruption and over-enthusiastic handling to be potentially stressful. Cats Protection, however, will judge each case on its own merits and carefully match the appropriate kitten – or cat – with the right family. Once the decision has been made, here are a few tips that may make the introduction easier:

- Establish the house rules before the cat arrives
  - Which family member is responsible for each chore – feeding etc?
  - Where will the cat sleep?\* – remember cats prefer multiple places to sleep
  - Which rooms will be out of bounds?
  - What level of attention is appropriate during the settling in period?
- Every member of the family should understand the importance of security by keeping external doors and windows shut
- Ensure the cat has plenty of escape opportunities from excitable or fractious children, for example
  - Shelving
  - Tall cat activity centres/scratching posts
  - Tops of cupboards or wardrobes
  - Under beds
- Educate children from an early age how to be gentle around cats
- Holding a cat appropriately, with support under the front and hind legs, is easy to learn once a child is shown and will make it far more likely that the cat will tolerate being picked up without struggling
- Ensure the cat or kitten is regularly wormed and treated for fleas
- Ensure litter trays are cleaned regularly

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## Cats and babies

It is not always the cat that is the newcomer as many are established members of the family when children come along. Concerns over the cat's potential jealousy when confronted with a new baby may cause a great deal of unease in mums-to-be and many even consider rehoming the cat for the wellbeing of the baby. Fortunately, such drastic measures are rarely necessary and owners should be

aware that the cat's reaction may well be more to do with stress because of the sudden disruption and change in routine.

The key to a stress-free arrival for all concerned is to plan ahead and start with a thorough MOT for the resident cat. Vaccinations, worming and flea control should be brought up to date and the cat neutered, if this hasn't already been done. This is also a good time to address any existing behavioural problems, such as house soiling or aggressive behaviour, even if owners have tolerated them before. The upheaval and disruption caused by the arrival of a baby may make the problems worse.

If the cat is used to having the owner's undivided attention and seems to thrive on it, the time to redefine the relationship needs to start early in the pregnancy. No matter how much love the cat receives, it will be virtually impossible to sustain the same degree of attention once a new baby arrives. Gradually reducing the amount of direct contact should coincide with increased stimulation, for example, more time outside or more activity indoors that will provide an outlet for energy that doesn't involve the owner. New parents have many responsibilities, night and day, so the cat's routines, including feeding, grooming, playing and other general chores, will have to fit around them. If this adapted routine is introduced as soon as possible it will aid in reducing the impact of baby's arrival.

The decision about where the baby is going to sleep at night should be made and this room declared 'out of bounds' early in the pregnancy so that the closure doesn't represent another change once the baby comes home. All accessories such as buggies and cots are best introduced over a period of time to avoid a sudden burst of challenging smells and objects at the last minute. Housebound cats are more sensitive to changes in their environment so a baby's arrival will have a greater impact on those who are kept exclusively indoors.

Once baby arrives, the established routines can be maintained and the cat allowed to hide or investigate, depending on mood. Although it's probably wise to advise that newborn babies should not be left alone with a cat, no matter how trustworthy, the ultimate message is to relax and enjoy!

## Toddlers and cats

Once baby grows, it can be difficult to teach a toddler to handle a cat appropriately. The temptation for a small child is often to scream, chase and grab so the need for escape strategies is essential. Baby gates preventing toddlers from climbing stairs are a great asset to the cat under these circumstances and many will seek refuge upstairs. A few extra considerations are probably necessary for those youngsters less capable of following rules:

- Litter trays, food and water bowls are irresistible so these should ideally be located in areas where the child does not have access
- Always supervise encounters and show the toddler how to handle gently and stroke the fur in the right direction
- Make the experience pleasant for the cat as well by offering food treats as a reward for tolerating the child's attention ●

\*Although the bedroom is often an exciting prospect, this should be discouraged if the child suffers from any allergies. A number of studies in the UK and USA however report that exposure to pets during infancy may significantly reduce the risk for asthma and allergies in later childhood and it has been indicated that primary school children from pet-owning households have lower sickness absenteeism from school. For more information, see *Cats and People – Cats Protection Essential Guides*



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