



Children and Cats: Important Information for Parents

Living with a cat can be beneficial to children. Cats can enhance children's self-esteem, teach them responsibility and help them to learn empathy. However, children and cats may not always automatically start off with a wonderful relationship. Parents must be willing to teach the child acceptable limits of behavior to make their interactions pleasant and safe.

Selecting A Cat

What age is best? Many people have a warm and fuzzy image of a kitten and a child growing up together. If you have a young child and are thinking of adopting a kitten, there are few things you should consider.

- **Time and energy:** Kittens can require a lot of time, patience and supervision. They require proper socialization to become well-adjusted adults. This means they need to be provided with lots of positive experiences! If your child frightens your kitten too much, they might start to associate your child with fear, and hide when your child is near.
- **Safety:** Kittens, because they are babies, are fragile creatures. A kitten might be easily frightened, or even injured, by a well-meaning, curious child who wants to constantly pick him up, hug him or explore his body by pulling tails.
- **Rough play:** Kittens (and cats) have sharp claws as well as sharp teeth that may inadvertently injure a small child. All interactions between your child and your new feline need to be closely supervised to minimize chances of injury.

Adult cats require less time and attention once they have adjusted to your family and household routine, although you'll still need to spend time helping your new dog and the transition to his new home. You can better gauge how hardy and tolerant an adult cat will be of a child's enthusiasm and can even adopt a cat that you know has previously lived with children successfully.

Starting Off Right

Below are some guidelines to help you start off on the right foot. Remember, children should never be left alone with a cat or kitten without adult supervision.

Holding

- Have your child sit down either on a couch or on the floor before holding their new feline friend. Felines can be squirmy and keep in mind they have claws. If held insecurely, a cat may become frightened and scratch in response. If kitty is squirming quite a bit, it might not be a good time for cuddle time!
- Have your child offer the feline a toy or treat while being petted. This will help the cat associate your child with something positive!

- For adult/larger cats, have your child sit in your lap and let the cat approach both of you. This way you can control your child and not allow him to get carried away with pats that are too rough. You are also there to teach your new kitty to treat your child gently.

Petting and Giving Affection

Children often want to hug/grab cats around their stomachs. This can be very frightening for a cat. It is very possible that a cat may respond by scratching or biting. You should teach your child to put his/her hand out and let the cat come to your child's hand. Slow, soft, gentle and long strokes on the cat's head is a great place to start. Scratches under the chin and the side of the kitty's face is another area that is a safe bet! Don't forget to supervise and make sure your child's affection doesn't turn too rough.

Supervising Play

One key rule is to make sure your child doesn't use his/her hand or fingers as toys. You do not want to teach your new feline that body parts are toys! Encourage your child to sit and grab a cat toy like a wand that the kitty can chase. Cats like to play fetch too!

Monitor your new cat's behavior. Some cats can get overstimulated and can get "feisty" if they continue to play or be petted. Signs of overstimulation are: tail twitching, ears pointed backward, stiff body, dilated pupils. If you see any of these signs, disrupt playtime.

If your kitty swats or scratches your child, never "bop" them on their nose. This replicates cats swatting each other and teaches them to swat back!

Cats are nocturnal and will likely be most active at night when you are sleeping. Be sure that your kitty has enough toys to play with during this time so they do not wake you up asking to be entertained. Your cat needs scratching surfaces as well, so be sure these items are accessible throughout the night.