

Children and Cats: Important Information for Parents

Living with a cat can be beneficial to children. Cats can enhance a child's self-esteem, teach them responsibility and help them to learn empathy.

Selecting a Cat

Under 2 years of age

- **Time and energy:** Require a lot of time, patience and supervision.
- **Safety:** May become 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 on his tail or ears.
- **Rough play:** Young cats have sharp teeth and claws with which they may inadvertently injure a small child. All interactions between your child and young cat need to be closely supervised in order to minimize the chances of either being injured.

Over 2 years of age

- **Time and energy:** Require less time once they've adjusted to your family and household routine.
- **Safety:** You can better gauge how hardy and tolerant an older cat will be of a child's enthusiasm. You can also work with your local animal shelter to adopt a cat that has previously lived with children.

As a general rule, if your child is under six years old, it's best to adopt a cat that's over two years old.

Starting Off Right

Below are some guidelines to help you start off on the right foot. Remember to always supervise small children with your new cat.

- **Holding:** Have your child sit down whenever he wants to hold the cat.

Keep in mind that some cats do not like to be held, but will sit next to you and your child, especially if offered treats or petting. Have your child sit in your lap and let the cat approach both of you. This way you can keep your child from getting "carried away" with pats that are too rough.
- **Petting:** Petting is a great way for your cat to make positive associations with your child. Teach your child to pet lightly and that the cat should always be allowed to leave when it feels like it.
- **Treats:** Treats are another great way for your cat to make good associations with your child. Have your child place the treat in an open palm, rather than holding it in his fingers.
- **Play:** Playing is a great way for your child and cat to positively interact with each other. Teach your child to play with your cat using toys, instead of hands, by either throwing a toy, like a mouse or ball, or by dangling a fishing pole toy.



- **Training:** Training is a great way to strengthen the bond between your cat and the family. There are several basic cat information classes or cat training classes that you and your child can attend. See our class schedule for a listing of the cat classes we offer.

Cats and Babies

See our handout: "Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival"

Remember to be patient. Your new cat may take some time to feel comfortable around your child. Your cat also needs to learn which behaviors on his part are appropriate and which are not. Our handout "Managing Your Young Cat's Rough Play" outlines procedures for discouraging rough play and encouraging appropriate play.

Punishing your cat or kitten for inappropriate behavior will not help and is likely to make matters worse. If he learns that being around children always results in "bad things" happening to him, he may become defensive in their presence.

If your cat is growling, hissing, or biting at your child for any reason, the situation needs IMMEDIATE attention. Please refer to our handout "When the Behavior Help Line Can't Help" for information on where to get further assistance and guidance in this matter.