

Cats, babies can get along

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Health Advice from animal experts will help pet adjust to a major change in the household

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Some people still believe the myth that a cat will suck the breath from a sleeping infant.

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Jacquelyn Martin/The Associated Press

Demetrius Behram Farley, 2, cuddles with his cat Penelope, in Hyattsville, Md.

But if cats could pass on their own myths about babies, they'd probably be just as scary: weird noises, new smells, such unpredictable behaviour!

"To some cats, babies are like aliens from outer space," says Dr. Kat Miller, behaviourist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. As if that's not enough, there's also the disruption to the household routine, she says.

"Cats are creatures of habit; they prefer consistency," says Miller. "Any abrupt change in their life can cause anxiety and fear."

Setting up the new furniture well ahead of time will help ease the transition when a baby's on the way. If this results in a new spot for the litter box, be sure to place it where the cat won't be disturbed when using it. Otherwise, he may decide to do his business elsewhere.

You can try to accustom your cat to baby sounds by playing a recording regularly, and to smells by using baby lotions on yourself and letting the cat sniff them.

And if you're worried about the cat scratching the baby, have your vet show you how to trim his nails regularly. You might also consider a product called Soft Claws - soft caps that are glued to a cat's claws.

Think about changes in routine that the new baby will bring, and try to gradually transition to that schedule for the cat's feeding, play and cuddling time, says Miller.

Once the baby comes home, contact with any animal should be supervised. The simplest way to keep a cat away from a sleeping baby is to keep the door closed, and there are devices called crib tents and scat mats that discourage cats from climbing into cribs.

If the cat is attracted to the crib - a common worry which often amounts to nothing - chances are, it's because it's the highest spot in the room. Consider adding perches like high cat trees to various parts of the house.

"It can observe, and get away from probing fingers," Miller says. "That way it doesn't have to hide under a couch, but can be part of the family."

It also helps to make sure the cat knows what's allowed, not just what is forbidden.

For example, if you don't want him in the crib or on your lap when you're nursing, put a treat in a nearby perch or cat bed to give him a place where he can go and still be in your company.

Never hold the cat still to meet a baby, says Miller. Well-meaning people may think this will show the cat that the baby won't harm him, but she says, "If someone held me in place and put a big tarantula in my face, I wouldn't feel happy about meeting the tarantula!"

Also avoid the other extreme of panicking if the cat goes near the baby, which teaches the animal that the baby causes upsetting things to happen. Allow the cat to observe and approach at his own pace.

If his tail's up (not wagging, which, unlike in dogs, is a sign of agitation) and his ears are pricked up, he's relaxed and interested.

"Praise the cat for gentle behaviour, sniffing, nuzzling - it's creating a bond," says Miller.

In the end, though, remember that how a cat adjusts to a new baby depends a lot on his personality, as Jillian Behram of Hyattsville Md., found.

Her cats, Picasa and Penelope, had plenty of time to get used to the baby furniture and supplies, and even got to sniff baby Demetri's hospital cap before he arrived home. They cuddled in her lap while she was nursing and she says, "both cats were great for the first three months."

But one day when Demetri was three months old, he was lying on the bed and launched into a screaming fit unlike the newborn cries the cats were accustomed to.

"Picasa literally pounced on him, grabbed his head and nipped at him," says Behram. "When I picked him up, she followed me around and I had to lock myself in the bathroom. She was outside the bathroom howling back."

Even separated from the baby for a week in an upstairs bedroom, Picasa still howled when the baby screamed. So despite her attachment to Picasa, who she'd acquired as a six-week-old kitten, Behram found her a home with a friend.

Picasa now lives happily with a family with three older children.

The other cat's reaction?

Always the more docile of the two, what upset Picasa had no effect on Penelope, says Behram. "The other cat is fine."