

Babies, Toddlers and Cats

Becoming pregnant and bringing an infant into your home is a joyful, exciting, and often anxious, time of change in you and your cat's lives. You do not have to find another home for your cat just because you become pregnant or have a baby! There are many things that you can do to allow your cats and kids to co-exist peacefully.

During Pregnancy

Toxoplasmosis

One major concern for pregnant women is toxoplasmosis. This parasite can be transmitted from cat to human and can cross the placenta during your first trimester, infecting the unborn baby. Toxoplasmosis is not common in cats, but it occurs more in cats that are allowed outdoors. It is important to know that the most common form of transmission is by ingesting the feces of an infected cat, and the toxoplasmosis cysts in the stool must be exposed to oxygen for at least 24 hours before becoming infectious! Someone should scoop your cat's litter box twice daily. If you wash your hands thoroughly after scooping the litter box (or wear gloves and a mask) and regularly sweep stray litter from around the litter box area, you are **not** at risk. Then again, this is a great time to take a vacation from scooping litter boxes by having another family member scoop them for nine months!

Fifty percent of toxoplasmosis infections are acquired by eating undercooked meat or gardening in contaminated soil. You can have your cat tested and treated for toxoplasmosis. Routine deworming for intestinal parasites is recommended for cats living indoors and those living in close proximity to humans. The Cat Clinic of Roswell follows the CDC guidelines for deworming one to four times per year. The guidelines are established by the companion animal parasite control.

Preparing for the Baby's Arrival

Preparing for your baby's arrival can be stressful not only for you, but also for your cat. Cats often don't like change, but gradual changes are less stressful for them. For example, rather than painting, redecorating, and furnishing the baby's room in one weekend, make changes slowly and give the cat time to adjust before changing something else.

As you gradually set up the baby's room, allow your cat access to this room at all times so she can explore and become familiar with the changes. Place the baby's furniture in the room. Buy baby wipes, lotions, bath items, and diapers to introduce your cat to the smells associated with a baby. You might borrow blankets, stuffed animals or toys from parents of new babies so that your cat can learn that new baby smell. A cat's sense of smell is approximately 1,000 times stronger than a human's (compared to a dog's sense of smell which is about 100 times greater than a human's). Even scents that are "light" to human noses can be

overwhelming to a cat. All of those new smells and odors associated with the baby can cause anxiety for your cat.

A baby's crying can sound like a cat fight, which can be stressful to the cat. It's a great idea to play a recording of baby sounds at random intervals and volumes during your pregnancy so the cat can get used to those sounds. You can purchase a CD of baby sounds from crying to cooing, to help familiarize your cat with the new sounds. It is important to gradually desensitize the cat by using positive reinforcement, such as feeding or playing while you play the baby sounds.

Feliway plug-ins may be helpful, both during your pregnancy and after you bring home the baby. Feliway mimics the cat's facial pheromones; you can't smell it, but the scent helps the cat relax, which is why they race rub.

Cats in the Baby's Room?

Decide now whether you will allow your cat access to your baby's room at all times, or only with supervision. If you shut the cat out of the baby's room completely, it can contribute to stress and make the cat more interested in the room. Cats need to explore, and barring them from a room causes anxiety and only makes them try harder to get inside. We recommend installing a screened door in the doorway to the baby's room. This allows your cat to see, hear and smell what's happening in the room, but prevents entry unless you open the door. If your cat likes to scratch on doors, cut Plexiglas inserts to cover the bottom portion of the door to prevent damage to the screens.

Another option is to allow your cat full access to your baby's room at all times, and protect the baby with a crib tent. A crib tent either attaches to the top of the crib or fits around the mattress, which creates a tent structure over the top of the crib and shields your baby from friendly cats who want to cuddle in the crib.

Preparing the Cat

If you do not already have cat condos for your cat, get them now! Your cat will need safe areas – high places to escape from your child rather than having to defend itself (possibly by scratching). We recommend at least one escape area in each room, such as a favorite cat condo, favorite armchair or a bed.

You can also install baby gates to create a safe room for them. The cats can enter (either under or over the gate) to eat, rest, hide, etc., but the child cannot. An added benefit of installing baby gates early is that your cat won't be as stressed to see you add more gates as your baby becomes a toddler.

During Your Hospital Stay

During your pregnancy, you should make arrangements for someone to visit and care for your cats while you're in the hospital. Family members and friends are often eager to help. Your cats know that major changes are about to take place – they need attention to reassure and calm them.

Send home a blanket that your baby has snuggled in, so that the cats can get used to the baby's scent. You can introduce your cats to the smell of your newborn in various ways: rub the blanket onto cat condos or cat bedding; rub the blanket onto objects in the baby's room; or place the blanket in a high-traffic area for the cats to explore at their own pace.

Homecoming and the First Few Weeks

Though it may be difficult to tear your focus away from the baby, you need to pay attention to your cats when you arrive home. They've missed you and they need reassurance. Then you can introduce your new baby to the cats. You **must** supervise these initial meetings between the baby and your cats. As with any animal, do not leave them together with your baby, unsupervised.

There are many ways to introduce your baby and the cats, depending on the cats' personalities. One way is to place the baby (seated in the carrier) on the floor and sit down with your baby and cats. Let your cats' natural curiosity guide them – they will come to the baby and sniff cautiously at their own pace. Remember to praise and encourage the cats during this introduction to make them feel more comfortable. Use positive reinforcement, such as canned food or treats to help your cats associate the baby with things that they like. Continue to do this every time your cat and baby are in each others' company to strengthen their relationship. Cats that are timid or scared may not immediately come to meet the baby, but bolder cats will sniff and possibly rub on the baby. The rubbing is a sign of acceptance; the cat is marking the baby as one of the family. Do not force the introductions! Allow the cats to pace themselves and get to know the baby in time.

Touch your baby, and then touch your cats to intermingle their scents. A group of cats living together form a colony odor, which includes the humans. "Cross-scenting" keeps all of the members of the colony smelling familiar.

Another method of introduction is to allow the cats into the baby's room while you supervise. If you have several cats, limit it to one or two cats at a time.

Use your judgment based on your cats' personalities to decide which methods are best for your household. Stay positive and remember to pay attention to the cats as well as the baby to create a positive experience.

Comfort and reassure your cats regularly, especially during stressful times, such as when your baby's crying. Create a routine with your new baby that includes your cats: when you feed the baby, offer treats or canned food to the cats; at nap-time, allow the cat access to the baby's

room while you rock him to sleep; play with the cats using an interactive toy while you hold the baby.

Though you're busy, it's important to make time to play with the cats. Even a few minutes several times a day will help them. You can use interactive toys such as laser pointers and feather flyers; you can even do this while you hold the baby. All members of the family should engage the cats in play. Your cats want to be close to you and your family!

Do not restrict your cats excessively because it may cause unwanted anxiety-based behaviors, such as inappropriate elimination, scratching on doors, or excessive vocalization. If your cats show unusual behavior, such as changes in their eating, drinking or elimination habits, contact your vet. Do not automatically assume that you must find a new home for the cats. Most of these behavior changes are medical in nature and can be treated. Stress can trigger dormant or new medical concerns. If medical causes are ruled out, then explore possible behavioral causes. By gradually introducing the baby into your home, you will prevent or minimize behavior problems.

From Baby to Toddler

As your baby develops, he will become more interested in your cats. Supervise all interaction between the child and your cats. Begin teaching your child at an early age about how to be gentle with your cats and give them attention appropriately.

Remember that if a cat feels threatened by your child's behavior, the cat will respond accordingly. For example, if your child grabs your cat's tail or pets your cat too harshly, the cat may scratch the child to signal that the cat is upset. Your cat will NOT scratch your baby for no reason. Keep your cats' nails trimmed to minimize any scratches to your child. Do NOT declaw your cat! Declawed cats bite more frequently because their first line of defense has been removed. A scratch is preferable to a bite every time.

If your cat becomes overly aggressive toward your child, consult your veterinary team immediately. You can desensitize the cat to your child's presence and help your cat develop a positive relationship with your child. You and your child can play, read, sleep or eat in the same room with your cat without engaging your cat in the activity. Reward your cat with affection or treats every time there is no aggressive behavior shown. Over time, you can begin to include your cat in your activities, gradually increasing the interaction between your cat and your child. These steps will help your cat develop a bond with your child. When your child is older, he can engage your cat in play sessions using interactive toys; this will build a positive relationship between them.

When your child begins to crawl and walk, he will want to explore every corner of your home, including cat food bowls and litter boxes. To prevent your child from ingesting inappropriate items, you can place cat food and water bowls on higher surfaces to limit the child's access. (Remember to

make the change gradually.) You might establish a “safe room” for your cats, with a baby gate in the doorway. The cats can crawl under or jump over the gate, but your child can't get in. (Do NOT place litter boxes near the cats' food and water bowls.) Deworm your cats regularly to minimize the potential for the child to ingest common parasites.

Home safety measures are similar for cats and kids! Install cabinet and drawer locks; store chemicals safely; use protective devices for the stove; keep breakable items behind closed doors or in curio cabinets; place protective covers on sharp corners of furniture; use night lights, electrical outlet covers, and wire guards. Many people start to cat-proof their household using some of these options; by the time you bring home a baby, most safety precautions have already been taken!

Many people acquire their cats before having children and consider their cats as members of their family. Taking on a new commitment (your baby) is no reason to give up on an earlier one (your cats). Many people have healthy children and cats without feeling guilty about spending too little time with either the children, or the animals. Approach any problems that you encounter, with either your cats or your children, with compassion.

Children are fascinated by animals and learn quickly how to touch, play and interact with them. They want to be around the cats and cats usually accept babies readily. Studies have shown that children who are raised with pets have stronger immune systems and are less likely to develop allergies to animals as adults. Having pets in the home with children not only boosts health, but also helps children learn responsibility and unconditional love. If you follow our recommendations, your cats and children can coexist peacefully and successfully! Please contact The Cat Clinic of Roswell with any questions.

Resources

Cat condos and furniture:

- Crijo Pet Products (www.crijopets.com)
- Doctors Foster & Smith catalog (www.drsfostersmith.com)
- Local pet supply stores

Baby gates with cat holes/doors:

- Drs. Foster & Smith catalog (www.drsfostersmith.com).

Barrier gates with swinging doors:

- Babies R' Us (www.babiesrus.com)
- One Step Ahead (www.onestepahead.com)

Baby sounds CD:

- Preparing Fido (www.preparingfido.com)

Crib tents:

- Babies R' Us (www.babiesrus.com)