

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 have a wonderful relationship. Parents must be willing to teach the cat and the child acceptable limits of behavior in order 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 (less than 1 year old) there are a few things you need to consider.

- **Time and energy:** Kittens require a lot of time, patience and supervision. If you have a young child who already requires a lot of care and time, you should ask yourself if you will have enough time to care for a kitten as well.
- **Safety:** Kittens, because they're babies, are fragile creatures. A kitten 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:** Kittens have sharp teeth and claws with which they may inadvertently injure a small child. Kittens also tend to climb up on small children and accidentally scratch. All interactions between your child and kitten will need to be closely supervised in order to minimize the chances of either being injured.
- **Advantages of getting an adult cat:** Adult cats require less time and attention once they've adjusted to your family and household routine. You can better gauge how hardy and tolerant an adult cat will be of a child's enthusiasm and you can 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. Although kittens can be a lot of fun and it's exciting and rewarding to help them grow into wonderful companions, they do require significantly more time to supervise than an adult cat.

Who Will Care For the Cat?

It's unrealistic to expect a child, regardless of age, to have the sole responsibility of caring for a cat. Cats need basic things, like food, water, shelter and litterbox maintenance, but they also need to be played with and given opportunities to exercise on a consistent basis. Teaching a cat the rules of the house and helping him become a good companion is too overwhelming a task for a young child. While responsible teenagers may be up to the task, they may not be willing to spend an adequate amount of time with the cat, as their desire to be with their friends usually takes over at this age.

If you're adopting a cat "for the kids," you must be prepared and willing to be the cat's primary caretaker.

Starting Off Right

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

Holding: Because kittens often squirm and wiggle they can easily fall out of a young child's arms and become injured. If held too tightly or forcibly restrained, the kitten may respond by scratching or biting. It is safest for everyone if your child is sitting down whenever he wants to hold the kitten.

For adult 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 cat to treat your child gently. Some cats do not want to be held, but will sit next to you and your child if offered treats or petting. Keep in mind that the cat should be allowed to leave when it feels like it.

Petting and giving affection: Children often want to hug cats or grasp them too firmly. Your cat may view this as a threatening gesture, rather than an affectionate one, and may react with scratching or biting. You should teach your child to let the cat approach on his own terms and pet lightly. You should also teach your child to avoid staring at, or looking directly into, your cat's eyes.

Giving treats: When children offer a treat from fingers held together as a pincher the cat may accidentally bite fingers instead of only taking the treat. Have your child place the treat in an open palm, rather than holding it in his fingers. You may want to place a hand underneath your child's hand to help guide him.

Supervising play: Cats interpret quick and jerky hand movements as an invitation to play. You should teach your child to offer the cat or kitten a toy on a string in order to maximize the distance between the child's hands and the toy. Encouraging a cat to play with hands and fingers may result in scratches or bites.

Be patient: Your new cat may take some time to feel comfortable with your child's actions and sounds and will approach when he feels ready. Your cat must also learn which behaviors on his part are appropriate and which are not. Our handout "Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play" outlines procedures for discouraging rough play and encouraging appropriate play. Punishing your cat for inappropriate behavior will not help. If he learns that being around children always results in "bad things" happening to him, he may become defensive in their presence.