Cats and Kids

When acquiring a cat, the presence of young children in the household should be considered. With all innocence, a child may pull a cat's tail, stick objects in it's ears, embrace a cat too strongly, poke the cat, or anything else that strikes the child's fancy. To the untutored child this is fun, to the cat it is not, and the most gentle, docile cat may respond with a bite or scratch. The experience of having an animal companion can be a very good one for children—an unsurpassable way of learning about love, responsibility and general respect for life. But children do need instruction and close supervision to insure the experience is always a positive one—for both kids and cats.

Cats and babies

There are many myths about cats, in particular about cats and babies. One is that cats like to suck the breath out of babies, or that cats smother a baby if allowed to sleep in the child's crib. Both of these are totally unfounded, and common sense treatment is more than enough to keep both cats and baby safe. Cats may like to snuggle with babies because they are warm, soft and don't make quick movements. With supervision, this can be a good way for your cat to get to know the new baby and to help diffuse any feelings of jealousy or distress your cat may feel about the new arrival. You could try letting your cat snuggle with you and the baby while you are nursing or holding the baby. This way the cat will begin to grow accustomed to the sounds, sights and smells of the baby.

When the baby starts to crawl, it will often start reaching for the cat and try to grab hold of the cat's tail or face. At this age—if the groundwork has been laid for a positive relationship between the cat and the baby —it is a simple matter for the cat to slip away from the baby's grasp. When the baby is quiet, the cat will likely return. The child at this age poses no threat to the cat and cannot prevent the cat from leaving when he wants to. A loved cat that feels secure in its place in a household will usually keep out of reach of the baby if it is being to rambunctious, or will manage to squirm away—without showing aggression—if grabbed and squeezed.

The toddler stage is a different story. This is a time of transition, and the cat will now need to be actively protected from the child. As a toddler, the child becomes strong enough to inadvertently harm the cat. The child may pick up a toy, swing it about and accidentally hit the cat sitting close by. Children at this age are not yet capable of understanding that they now have a superior strength. Constant adult supervision is needed until the child learns the rules involved in dealing with the cat. The first rule the child should learn is: *never try to hold a cat if the cat wants to go. If you always let the cat go, it will always come back to you.* As long as the cat can leave if it wants to, it will never have reason to scratch. Cats scratch only as a last resort if they are extremely upset and frightened. The close supervision of the child with cats will last until the child is about six years old—at this age kids become more dependable at remembering, as well as following, the rules.

As a note, the above information is intended for adult cats and children. The situation is different with kittens. It is recommended by most veterinarians and shelter personnel that you not bring a kitten into a household with toddlers. Little children with the best intentions and kindest hearts in the world can maul a kitten to death,

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literally. All it takes is one moment of unsupervised contact for the kitten to be severely injured or dead and the child to be faced with the guilt of their actions. Protect both your children and your cat by choosing a fully grown cat if adding a feline to your young family.

Cats and young children

Cats with all their claws intact are by far the gentlest and safest companions of young children. Declawed cats are often not good with kids, as they seem less secure in their own abilities to escape and will be more likely to bite. As children grow up, they will probably find the feeding and litter cleaning fascinating. Many children like to help with these activities. This is one of the many contributions your cat makes to your child's welfare and personal growth. Just by their mere presence in the family, cats introduce the youngsters to a sense of responsibility.

However, the wise parent (and responsible cat guardian) never actually uses a helpless animal as a tool to teach children responsibility. Children may help with cat care—with the adult still in charge and overseeing. But even if the children are given full responsibility and think they are totally in charge, the aware adult will keep a constant, if surreptitious, check to see that each mealtime, each cleanup, each grooming session, and the condition of the litterbox continue on the same high standards that prevailed before the younger family members took over. In other words – innocent animals must not be made to pay for the child's forgetfulness or carelessness. And never get rid of an animal because the children are not caring for it properly. If this is the case, then an animal should never have been acquired in the first place and another one should not be obtained. It is not the children who have failed the cat in their responsibility and commitment in this case, but rather the adult.