

Creating a cat-friendly home for parents of new babies



Congratulations on the arrival (or imminent arrival) of your new baby. For some people getting the news that they're having a baby has them wondering whether it will be possible to have a home with a baby and cat living safely and happily together. And sometimes people make the difficult decision to re-home their cat thinking it won't work. This guide is to help you create a cat-friendly home so that your cat – and you – feel at ease when baby arrives. Below you'll find information on the preparations you can make prior to the birth as well as how to introduce your cat to the new addition to the family.

First, some basics about cat behaviour:

- Cats thrive in an environment that has few changes and where there are consistent routines. They can get stressed when there are sudden changes in the home such as new people, renovations or redecorating, new items of furniture etc. So the arrival of a baby can be quite stressful for some cats - not only is there a new little being in the home, but also the sounds and smells that come with the baby as well as the new furniture and toys. Cats can adapt to change but they need time and they will do far better when the changes are made gradually.
- Even though our cats are domesticated, they are still territorial animals and your home is their core territory; it's where they eat, sleep and socialise with you so we want them to feel safe and relaxed. It is often comforting for a cat if they have a place to go to hide away, undisturbed. A lot of cats like high-up places where they can survey their environment. Providing shelving or creating access to the top of a chest of drawers or bookcase can help with this (and add a non-slip mat so any bedding doesn't slip off when they jump up). Other cats like to hide in boxes or under the bed to feel safe. If you're unsure which your cat prefers, you may need to provide both options to see which they use. Once they have a place, it's really important to leave it alone so pick a place that your cat can have on-going access to.
- A lot of people think that cats can't be trained – they can. Cats don't respond to punishment but they usually respond really well to positive reinforcement, which means looking for and rewarding those behaviours you want to see repeated. If you punish your cat with shouting/yelling to get out of the baby's room, your cat will likely start to be more fearful of you and develop a negative association with the room and/or baby.

- Cats communicate with us through their body, eyes, ears and tail and learning their language will help in understanding what they are feeling. A good visual resource can be found here: <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/a-visual-guide-to-cat-body-language/>
- You may have heard of the flight/fight response when people feel under stress. Cats are also mammals and when they feel threatened their natural response will be to run, fight to defend themselves or freeze. Some cats really hate being picked up – their paw pads are off the ground and they have lost all control for escaping. Just notice what happens when you pick up your cat – are they comfortable and relaxed, or wriggling to escape or do they go absolutely still and freeze until they're put back on the ground?
- To develop more trust with your cat or help to calm them when stressed, a very simple but effective technique is slow blinking. If you think of the opposite which is to have your eyes wide open, closely following your cat's every move – this is what a predator would do and your cat will feel very threatened. Closed eyes to a cat show that we're no threat and they will feel more calm and relaxed.

So now to the section on what you can do to help the transition to having your baby and cat living safely and comfortable together.

Preparation – ideally 6 to 8 weeks (or longer) before your due date

For a lot of people the nursery will be off-limits to their cat, completely. For others their cat will have access, but only when supervised. In both situations providing your cat with the opportunity to explore the room and sniff the new items such as the bassinet/cot, change table, pram/stroller will allow them to check them out and realise they are not a threat. After that you can keep the door closed or reward them when they stay away from certain items.

If your cat has been using the soon-to-be nursery, now is the time to make any changes so they have a chance to adapt. If you are decorating your baby's room, then remember that you will be (a) changing your cat's environment and (b) removing any of their scent in that room – and their scent is what makes the place familiar and comforting to them. So below are tips to consider putting in place well before your baby's arrival that will help with this transition:

- You'll be introducing a bassinet/cot, change table, chair etc and doing this will introduce lots of new smells which are unfamiliar to your cat. Before the baby arrives you can let your cat into the nursery to check out everything that is new. To a cat these are all potential threats so the aim of this exercise is to let them quietly explore and realise there's nothing to be worried about.

Some tips are:

- Do this when your house is quiet so your cat is relaxed and without distractions that might spook him/her and create a negative association.
- Let them explore and provide food treats near to the furniture e.g. legs of the cot, pram/stroller wheels. This will help in creating a positive association with the new items – and also cats will rarely spray (to mark their territory) if there is food there.
- If you have a cat that has in the past shown a tendency to spray – you can use a soft cloth, gently rub around the facial glands of your cat to gather some scent and then, using the same cloth, rub around the legs of the cot, pram, stroller, so that some of their own, familiar scent is transferred. In addition, you could add a few treats such as Temptations – or whatever is your cat’s favoured food treat – near the legs of the pram etc so that a positive association is developed.
- If you have a cat that has a tendency to scratch furniture know that this is also about marking their territory through visual scratches and also the pads in their paws transferring scent. They want you to know they have been there. So if you are allowing your cat access to the nursery on an on-going basis, then it may pay to buy a scratching post and place it at the end of the cot. That will allow your cat to scratch on an acceptable surface and will protect the cot.
- Once your cat seems relaxed with the new items of furniture, the next stage is to **reward them when they move away**. For example, if your cat will be allowed in the nursery but you would prefer them not to be in close proximity to the bassinet/cot, then you want to reward your cat as they move away from the cot. Toss a food treat some distance away and reward them consistently when they are in an area that you are happy for them to be in. Your cat will start to learn that there are no rewards when they are close to the cot, but there are when they’re in this other place. Rewards don’t always need to be food based, they can be playtime, stroking or giving praise to your cat – it has to be a reward that your cat wants, not a reward that you think your cat wants. There’s an important difference here which is crucial to understand because, for example, some cats don’t like to be petted or picked up, so if you pat them, that’s more of a punishment than a reward. This is where really understanding your cat’s body language will help.
- Cat’s bedding – if your cat has been sleeping in the nursery, again, add new places for them to sleep before removing their current bedding. Where will your cat have on-going access? Are there some new spaces you could create that are higher up so they will feel safe? It’s always a good idea to create a few places and your cat will quickly show you which they like to use. Once

the new places are established, then you can remove their bedding from the nursery.

- Daily routine – this is very likely to change once your baby arrives. Things that you might want to think about now are:
 - who usually feeds the cat and what's the daily routine? Who will typically feed your cat once baby arrives?
 - who usually spends time playing and/or grooming your cat?

If you can think about these things now and make some adjustments gradually, then it will help your cat not to feel quite so overwhelmed when your baby does arrive.

- If you have a timid cat, then now is a good time to start to prepare them for your baby's arrival. Googling online for 'baby crying' will provide you with lots of options. Play the sound of a baby crying while your cat is in another room – so just a low level of exposure to this new sound. Then see how your cat responds. If they get up and leave or look stressed, then turn down the volume or move the sound a bit further away. When you see your cat looking alert and relaxed, then reward with a food treat, or some praise and gradually increase the volume and reward again.
- Litter tray - your cat needs to feel safe to toilet because in nature, toileting is a time when a cat is at their most vulnerable from attack from other cats or animals.

If your cat has had a litter tray in the soon-to-be-nursery, then you'll want to move it. *Very* gradually, start to move the tray towards the door – moving little by little over several days. If you suddenly remove it, you risk your cat toileting on the floor and the smell from that will be very difficult to remove.

At the same time as gradually moving the litter box towards the door, add another litter tray in a place that your cat can have access to once the baby is home. Once your cat is using the new tray, then and only then should you remove the one in the nursery.

The ideal location of the litter box is a place that is quiet, with little foot traffic. Don't place next to the washing machine or near a door that might be opened at any time because if they are disturbed while using the tray, they will probably not want to go near it again. Also don't place in view of the cat flap, your cat will likely not use it – especially if you have a neighbouring cat that has come in through that cat flap.

Introducing your baby and cat!

Ultimately we want your baby and cat to live safely and happily together. Cats are naturally curious animals and will want to investigate this new little being that has arrived in your home. However, initially they might be scared by the crying and may stay away from your home for long periods - but so long as they have their basic resources of food, water and shelter – and just as importantly a continuing social relationship with you - then they will adapt over time.



Cats also love warmth and it's true that sometimes they may want to be up close to your baby for their body warmth. It's important then to supervise their interaction and take additional precautions such as keeping your cat out of the nursery by closing the door and/or using products that cover and protect the pram or cot from your cat jumping in and sitting on top of your baby.

- As soon as you arrive home with your baby, your cat will be able to smell there's a new little being in the house. If your baby is crying, your cat may well run away given the unfamiliar noise. This is when knowing that your cat has access to their food and water away from the baby means you can relax, knowing their basic needs are taken care of and you can focus on caring for your baby and yourself.
- Before introducing them in the same room, you might want to bring a blanket that your baby has slept on to a place where your cat can investigate it and process this new sensory information. Adding some food treats or some playtime with the blanket nearby can help in creating a positive association.
- When you're ready, come into a room with your baby and sit somewhere comfortable. Let your cat into the room and just quietly talk to them but let them approach you and explore on their terms. Your cat may only stay for a few seconds and then leave – and that's a really good start – you can always build on this. Allowing your cat to leave will give them the signal that it's okay, they can escape and so their stress will stay lower. If you pick up your cat and bring it to the baby and hold it there, they're going to feel trapped and threatened and that's when the stress hormone cortisol will rise and it's then that we start to see behavioural issues.

For one-on-one assistance, please go to my website and contact me:
<https://www.catbehaviouralsolutions.com/contact.html>

