

Raising children and cats TOGETHER

Some cats enjoy children, but not all can tolerate sticky fingers, rough tugs on the tail, or the general noisiness that accompanies kids. Before you adopt a cat, find out which breeds do best with children and discuss the decision to get a pet with your kids. They'll more likely accept some responsibility for the pet if you lay the groundwork and they feel involved.



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Training your child

Small kittens are easily hurt when mishandled by a well-intentioned but rough kid, and larger cats can strike out when provoked. Cat-scratch fever isn't just a Ted Nugent mantra. It's a real medical concern that affects about 22,000 people each year. Here are some rules to teach your children about handling a cat:

- > Gently approach the kitty to see if he wants to play. If he seems preoccupied with other thoughts, leave him alone until later.
- > Instead of wrestling, use teaser toys, rolled up balls of paper, or socks to play with the kitty. If you play with your hands, the cat will think they're his personal toys and that it's OK to attack hands and other human body parts.
- > Don't bother your pet at mealtimes, while he's grooming, when he's using the litterbox, or during one of his many naps. Also leave kitty be when he's staring intently at the birds outdoors or the mysterious movement under the couch. He's in his hunt mode and can easily replace his prey with you.
- > When you hold your cat, place your right hand under his chest, cradle his bottom with your left hand, and carry him close to your body, while you support his feet. If you're holding kitty and he starts to squirm, let him down gently. Don't try to hang on—you'll only end up suffering a wrathful scratch or nip.
- > Stroke your cat's coat gently in the direction the fur grows. Kitties don't like getting petted on their tummies, hips, or feet, so leave these areas alone.
- > As much as you'd like your cat to sleep on your bed,

it's best that he find his own spot to rest. (And this especially holds true for infants. While the old wives' tale that says cats steal sleeping children's breath isn't true, cats do love to sleep near your head and can suffocate a baby or toddler.)

Advice for parents

Supervise your children when they play with the cat for the first few weeks. Also remember that infants and toddlers don't understand the difference between their stuffed cat and your live pet, and an angry exchange between child and cat can flare in an instant.

- > One caution: Always supervise a child under 6 when he or she holds a pet, and never let a young child walk around holding a kitten.
- > And don't be surprised if the new cat frightens your young children. From their perspectives, he's a hissing, scratching toe-biter who pounces out from nowhere. In time, they'll learn to check under the bed skirt before climbing out of bed in the morning.

Training your cat

Cats and children can become such good friends that sometimes your cat forgets your child is not one of his littermates. For example, rowdy play can cause a kitten to nip his brother, and childish exuberance can get the same reaction.

- > Discourage hand biting verbally with a "no," and offer him socks or other toys to nibble. If the kitten is still wound up, try a few minutes of kitty "time out" in a quiet room. Even better, encourage your children to play quieter games with the kitten to prevent this behavior entirely.