Bringing Home Baby: Creating a loving environment for your cats and your newborn
Laura Scheinholtz

Whether you are a first-time human parent or have cats in the home for the first time when having a baby, it is natural to feel a bit apprehensive about how your new family will co-exist. Many new parents will attest to feeling a fierce need to protect their new child from anything and everything, but while this may make it seem like your cats need to be locked in a separate room or even be given away, that is not necessarily true*.

The following is a list of suggestions for preparing to bring a newborn into a household already ruled by cats (and let’s be honest, if you have a cat(s), they are the rulers!).

**Before Baby**

- Remember that cats, by nature, are territorial animals. If they have lived in your home for any length of time, they have covered every inch, marking with their scent. This is partly why bringing a new cat home can be a bit difficult – the two cats now have to work out who is dominant and whose scent goes where. Sometimes, not always, the “reigning” cat can feel threatened and problems ensue. The same feelings can affect a cat when a new human enters the home, especially a tiny, screaming, and face it, kind of smelly human. But we can help them.

- If cats are really the rulers of their kingdom, they should be able to rule from on high, right? Take a look around your home. Does the cat have access to anything that puts them high above the ground? Cats feel quite safe if they can get up above the action and survey everything that is going on. Not to mention, they can get underfoot, being so small, and they like that even less than we do. Giving them a place to be up high provides a sense of comfort, allows them to feel control over their dominion, and gives them a place that is just theirs. So how do we provide this for them? **Think vertical!**
Tall shelving units are great. You can get cheap units at places like IKEA or Big Lots. Check your local big box stores (Walmart, Target, etc.) for clearance sales or watch for stores like Bed, Bath, and Beyond that may be moving or closing. Many of these places will have great deals, particularly on display models. Remember, you don’t need these items to look perfect— if there’s a scratch, hey, there will be even more when you bring it home! Consider second-hand stores like Goodwill or St. Vincent DePaul and don’t rule out garage or estate sales.

Make this unit the cat’s and only the cat’s. Do not mix it with other purposes, such as storage for knick-knacks or books. Instead, line shelves with fleece blankets or other favorite fabrics (such as old towels or that shirt you know you’re never going to wear anymore because wherever it is, Fluffy McFluffers finds it and turns it into her bed). Drape a blanket or two over the open sides of one or more of the shelves to create a cave feeling—a retreat that is warm, dark, and again, all her own for when she feels anxious. Or hang a cheap curtain and curtain rod. Tall, skinny units work particularly well for this. If the unit is wide, consider cutting holes on alternating sides of each shelf so that the cat can jump from level to level! Make one level a play area by attaching toys to the shelf. You might even consider making a level a dining area—once baby becomes mobile, she WILL go straight for the cat food bowl.

An alternative to premade bookshelves is to visit your local home improvement store to stock up on: shelving boards, shelf brackets, and bulk carpeting. With some plans according to your home’s design, a few tools, and an afternoon, you can create your own wall play space for your cats. Using carpeting tape and a staple gun, wrap small shelf pieces with carpet and attach them to brackets on the wall. Set them up at different
levels so that they create a sort of stair-step look and feel. Long boards can be used in the same manner to allow cats to traverse above windows! If you prefer a wooden look to your shelf, simply put carpet on the top side. Many of these shelves will be high and you will not be able to see the top, but Mr. Snugglepuss will still be able to scratch and feel warm.

- Make sure that you do this in an area to which your cats will always have access. We don’t recommend doing this in Baby’s room. The baby and the cats will need their own space at the beginning. But creating the cat space can be done while setting up the new nursery! You will likely be spending some time making space that is just for Baby, so why not also use that same time frame to set up space that is just for Kitty? And creating this getaway before Baby’s arrival gives Kitty a chance to feel it out and make it all her own before her world changes.

- If you are creating a nursery, or even if you are simply bringing a crib and/or changing table into the home, do not keep it from the cat. Princess PrettyPaws will be naturally curious about the new things in her world. Allow her to explore before Baby is around. Let her sniff the crib, jump onto the changing table, mark the bouncer, and explore the newly set up room that probably looked far different before and in which she was allowed to hang out. After that, you may wish to condition her to stay away from particular areas (inside the crib or bassinet, for example). You can buy wide double-sided sticky tape to place on edges of furniture from any pet store. The idea is that when she jumps up, Princess will not like the feeling of the sticky on her paws and decide to go elsewhere (this is where her own space in the house comes in so handy!). But you may not have to buy special tape. Some people have reported that a little tinfoil works in much the same way. Cats will jump on it, dislike either the feel or noise under their paws, and be encouraged to find another place to be. If you can begin this training before a newborn inhabits your home, you get a head start.

- With a new baby, Cuddle McCuteStuff is going to necessarily be dealing with a change in routine. Even with other children in the house, the cat will receive less attention once Baby arrives. Therefore, there are a few things to do beforehand to help him get ready. It’s tempting to think that you should dote on him day and night now because, very soon, you won’t have the time to do so. However, if you get him into a routine of all-lovin’-all-the-time, you might be making it harder for him when, suddenly, that is removed. A more prudent route would be to start dedicating devoted times just to him. Spend some time just being with him, doing what he loves – letting him sit in your lap, a fierce ear scratching session, playing
“kill the string”, whatever he likes. But otherwise, begin to back off a touch. Get him used to the idea that you may not be able to scratch that adorable head absentmindedly all the time for a while. Do not neglect! But do not constantly dote.

Baby Arrives

- First child, 5th child, biological child, adopted child. No matter how your newest family member came to you, as a parent, you will be both over-the-moon and freaking exhausted! Your life is now likely consumed with three things: crying, feeding, and changing diapers. If you have other children, you also need to make sure they are doing okay — it’s generally good if they’re clean and fed. Sometimes the last thing you’re thinking about is spending time with Mittens. But dedicating even just a few minutes each day to spend with your cat can make all the difference. Make this time just between you and the cat. If you have other family members at home, encourage them to do the same. And remember, playing with a cat is a healthy way to have them use up energy, so you will be less likely to have a hyper cat around.

- Pay attention to how Tabbylicious reacts to Baby. Cats can have a wide variety of reactions to a newborn in their house. She may be completely indifferent, content to continue her life of lazing around or spending time in her new high-up world. She may be cautiously curious, following you and baby around, taking sneak peeks from the nursery doorway, or sitting behind you on the chair as you feed Baby. She may be quite curious and fearlessly jump to wherever Baby is. In a few cases, she may be aggressive. These last two situations call for a bit more vigilance. If Tabbylicious is interested, but not being dangerous, you can just continue to train her to stay out of baby’s crib, bassinet, high chair, etc. while showing her it is okay to sit near you and Baby on the couch or stay on the floor just outside the nursery. In the case of aggression, you should talk to your veterinarian about other steps to take. In all cases, remember that this stage of Baby being very little and requiring a lot of care is relatively short, considering the relationship your cat and your child will have.
• Help Whiskers maintain and continue to learn about his own new space that you erected before Baby came home. Let’s be frank: some things are going to slide. Blankets might get knocked off shelves and not be picked up right away. Food may get knocked out of bowls. But if you spend just a little time straightening for him, Whiskers will feel all the more at home in his space and likely come to love it.

This is an exciting and, sometimes anxious time for a family. Emotions are high, whatever they are, and we are programmed to be extra cautious with a new baby. But the need to rehome a cat is often an extreme. While we understand that an animal that is aggressive or a child with allergies may necessitate this step, we encourage all families with new, tiny members to really assess whether it is required.

Think in the long term. Your world with a newborn is like being in a tunnel. You have this absolute need to make sure they are safe. Any little thing that breaks into that tunnel seems like the end of the world. But big picture? Imagine what a wonderful time Baby and Cats are going to have growing up together. If your cats are at all intuitive, as many are, they can also be helpful. Some cats will even notify you when Baby is crying or in need (which is more or less helpful depending on if you’re letting baby cry on purpose!). And they can be quite nurturing once they get used to Baby.

What’s more, research has shown that children benefit in several ways from growing up with pets. Biologically, children are less likely to develop allergies if they grow up with animals in the house. Psychologically, children who grow up with pets tend to have a better understanding of health and how their own bodies work because they have often played a large role in caring for another living thing - that transfers to themselves. They understand better the importance of rest/sleep and exercise, and may even be more open to a well-rounded, nutritious diet later in life.

In summary, plan to start helping your cat adjust before baby arrives by: understanding cat nature, creating a space just for Kitty, introducing the cat to the new baby room, and restructuring your routine a little. Then continue to provide the same routine when baby
is brought home, devoting special time just to Kitty and paying attention to how Kitty reacts, seeking help if necessary. Hopefully, some of these techniques will help prevent rehoming cats that might just need a little different environment.

*In extreme cases that will require the loving rehoming of a cat, we urge you to work diligently with a local animal shelter or rescue to make sure the cat goes to an appropriate new home. Since shelters and rescues are always over-burdened and under-staffed, please ask for their help in rehoming the cat yourself. Placing the cat in a shelter or rescue should be a last resort.

Laura Scheinholtz is a cat lover and volunteered with Town Cats for several years as socializer, caretaker, adoption counselor, and foster parent before moving to Chicago, IL. She has two cats of her own and introduced a newborn into their house just over 3 years ago. Her daughter’s first word was “kitty”. She also holds a PhD in educational psychology with a focus on conceptual development in early childhood and is author of The Power of Playful Learning: The Green Edition (Maupin House, 2014).