



Dr. Kim's feline mews



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Cats and Babies, Kittens and Kids



Do cats damage babies

To dispel one myth - cats do not suffocate babies (no baby has ever been found with cat hair in its windpipe) and they certainly don't suck out the oxygen from a baby's breath. They will sleep close to babies especially if the crib is high up and warm. But they won't smother the baby.

Sometimes, cats will scratch babies and small children who don't respect the messages the cats will give before striking out (often with retracted claws but sometimes not). Persistent toddlers will also get scratched - if your toddler keeps cornering your cat, you might consider having Soft Paws (see following story) applied to prevent any damage while your toddler grows old enough to understand Cats Rules. Scratches can transfer Cat Scratch Disease (now known as Bartonella henselae) which causes mild symptoms of glands swelling in the armpits, but this does not usually require antibiotics.

There are however, reports of cats - unexpectedly and unprovoked - attacking babies (either scratching or biting). From reading a couple of reports, some were attacks by the family cat, some were attacks while visiting elsewhere. The cats involved seemed to be under social stress already, and mostly reacted to the high-pitched distress-cry / yowl of the baby. In one report though, the baby was sleeping in a basinet while visiting the cat's owner. The head and face were attacked. It is worth noting that none of the reports indicated an unfavourable

outcome. So, what to do? ALL cat bites should be taken seriously as upwards of 90% result in infections. In the first instance, clearly a visit to the medical centre is required if bitten by a cat.

In the articles, the description of the attacks sound like a displaced aggression (it was bite-and-run rather than a neck bite that would be a prey-hunting instinct) after the cat was aroused. Arousal can be caused by another cat, by the social situation or possibly by the child's cry (mothers know the spine-tingling noise I'm talking about).

Prevention is always better than cure, and the advice both from specialist behaviourist Dr Terry Curtis, and from mothers, is to make being with the baby a treat. One mum smeared cat food on the baby's (dirty) clothing so the cat got the baby smell along with the cat food (brilliant idea). An alternatively strategy is to feed the cat treats in the presence of the baby. This is a bit trickier though as many cats are not motivated by food.

Let me emphasise this - the problem is RARE, is associated with tense cats in tense situations, and is really just an accident of time and place. It is almost impossible to separate babies and cats 100% of the time, but minimising a cat's stress indoors is more likely to prevent any problems than all other measures put together.

Start here: www.indoorpet.osu.edu/cats Then remember to enjoy your cat and your baby as most get along just fine together. Truly - check the internet.

CAT's and Kids

Cats view babies and toddlers as different species to adult humans.

Remarkable perception really, though a bit confusing now that cats are living longer and can see them grow up! Cats will usually tolerate significantly more in the way of sticky fingers and uncoordinated proddings from a young human, and as long as they have an escape route they will use that in preference!

The key to managing the return of a new baby to the household, is to understand that the biggest concern for your cat is the changes in routine and smells. It is essential to manage the cat's natural curiosity, while protecting the baby and the cat from each other's unexpected actions. Cats don't smother babies (that was the traditional explanation for SIDS deaths), and they get into the cots because it is SOFT, WARM AND HIGH UP!

You have to decide BEFORE the baby comes home whether or not your feline friend will be allowed into the baby's bedroom. If not, then the time to install the screen door and start preventing access is NOW. Cats will learn not to go into rooms if they are NEVER allowed in there - they do not understand 'sometimes you can and sometimes you can't'. If you are going

to allow access to the nursery, then if you can provide a shelf with a view of what is going on nearby, your cat will probably be happier to sit there, as they are not big on the way babies move around in bed anyway, and they can take on a supervisory role!

It is a good idea to install the shelf and get your cat used to it before the baby arrives and everyone is pushed for time and energy. Many cats will keep their distance from babies and toddlers, but some cats really blossom with the arrival of the new baby, especially as it means someone is at home with them more! However, try to establish a routine that the cat can count on with feeding and playtimes for them as well, and always ensure they have an escape route to lessen their anxiety should the small human become too boisterous.

