

Baby Talk

Get the lowdown on how to help kids and cats mesh into one happy household.

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Cats are perceptive creatures. And, if you add their innate curiosity, very little escapes them. Most cats simply know when you are having a baby, and it often brings out their nurturing instincts. So include them in this wonderful event by preparing them well in advance.

There are still many myths perpetuated concerning cats and newborn babies. This is the age, though, of the information superhighway, and a lot of factual information supported by experts is out there on the Internet and in books aplenty.

In his book *Aint Misbehavin*, certified applied animal behaviorist John C. Wright, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., said that there is no reason to find the cat another home just because there's a baby on the way. Any parent obviously wants to keep a baby as safe as possible, Wright said. But in the long run, the child is going to be much better off exposed to the cat under controlled circumstances. If you include the cat by stroking and petting when it has access to the baby, it will automatically associate the baby with behaviors that feel good.

Myth: Cats steal babies' breath. They don't. However, the smell of milk-like substances may simply arouse a cat's inquisitiveness. At one stage, cats were even blamed for SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Now medical science knows better.

Myth: Cats are extremely jealous of babies. Strange behavior often is termed jealousy. In fact, it is nothing more than anxiety, a reaction to all the new activity in the household.

A cat's nurturing instinct often manifests itself in strange ways. When I was pregnant with my daughter, our calico, Nibbi, loved to lie against my tummy and feel the baby move. During the last few months of the pregnancy, she also showed her approval by bringing lots of presents—anything that wriggled or flew was presented at my feet on a daily basis.

When my son was born, her successor, California, another calico, did the very same thing. My son grew up with the cat around him all the time. He's now 10 years old and she's very protective. If I reprimand him, California deliberately steps between us—the feline maneuver to dispel tension.