

Kid Stuff

Create feline-child harmony in your home by following these techniques.

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For all my pet clients, I recommend that their youngest child be at least 6 years of age before bringing a new pet into the home, and that the child in question first prove he or she is sufficiently responsible in taking care of a living being instead of using the cat as a test object to teach responsibility.

When you do bring a cat home, put your child and cat in separate rooms and instruct your child to sit still on the floor to reduce any perceived threat. Let him or her feed the cat some treats once you let it into the room. Show your child how to pet the cat gently, in the direction of fur growth. Stop after a few minutes and repeat this procedure on subsequent days, making the kid-cat bonding sessions longer while showing your child how to engage safely in fun games that your cat will enjoy, too.

Then teach your child to be proud and protective of the family's new cat. Have your son or daughter assist you with easy activities like feeding the cat, changing its water and playing with the cat.

Be especially watchful when your child's friends come over. Some kids don't have pets and can't sufficiently empathize to understand the correct and safe way to interact with your cat without scaring it, playing too rough or ganging up on the cat.

While you socialize, closely watch your child and cat's behavior and body language. Avoidant, reluctant, fearful or aggressive behavior from the cat (ears back, tail swishing, growling, hissing, batting) or your child (fist formation, kicking, throwing objects, hitting or scream-chasing) can signal a dysfunctional and anxiety-ridden child-cat relationship that will probably need a few weeks of reconditioning on your own efforts or in consultation with your veterinarian, pediatrician or pet behavior consultant. Frequently, such reconditioning will involve engaging both your child and cat in a mutually enjoyable and fun activity; first, at a far distance with human and cat treats, then closing the distance over time, step-by-step, until one or both are no longer demonstrating avoidant or aggressive behavior.

By taking these precautions, you will ensure the development of a lifelong bond and a positive relationship between your children and your pets. And this can go a long way toward reducing cat hatred, cat abuse, aggressiveness, and other problematic child-cat interactions that were never adequately addressed.