

Reward Positive Cat and Child Interactions

A feline behaviorist suggests ways to encourage positive encounters between cats and young children.

Pam Johnson-Bennett

Q: My 1-year-old son is learning how to pet my cat, Xena. She tolerates it well to the point that she let William lay his head on her side last night. It was such a breakthrough that I want to reward Xena to reinforce her tolerance of the baby love. She does well but most of the time after a few pets and pats she'll often get up and leave. Besides giving her a treat to reward her behavior when she allows William to pet her, what else can I do? I know this seems trivial, but we're working on baby/cat relations in the house.

Feline behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *Think Like a Cat*, says: Xena, this isn't trivial at all. The fact that you want to start your son and Xena off on the right foot will mean they stand an excellent chance of having a close and wonderful relationship. Teaching children at a very young age to be gentle and kind to animals is a crucial lesson. You're doing a great job. I think the approach you should take is to let your son pet Xena for shorter periods of time and then end the session by involving your son in something else. This will be a better reward and a better lesson for both the cat and your child. William will only be petting for short periods so he won't have time to get into the patting type behavior and Xena will see that the session is short and she might even be left wanting more. Although it's good that Xena has learned to just get up and walk away when she no longer wants interaction, it would be better if it ends while she is still in the original position. You also have to time the sessions so your son is petting when he is in a relaxed and calm mood and not revved up for play. I think having a shorter petting session will be reward enough for Xena because it will be a totally positive experience. Don't let it get to the point where her body language starts to change and you'll probably see that she'll start relaxing as she begins trusting William. Best, Pam Johnson-Bennett, CABC IAABC-Certified Animal Behavior Consultant

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