

Develop Good Relationships Between Children and Cats

Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Your children and the family cat can have a loving, close relationship but it's up to you to show them how animals are to be treated and handled as soon they are able to comprehend. With careful, age-appropriate training, it will give your children the awareness and sensitivity needed to begin a lifetime of appreciating and loving animals. From the cat's point of view, this will establish the beginning of trust. Once your cat knows she can trust your children to be gentle and respectful of her space, the relationship will grow.

Create Safe Zones

Even if your children are the most gentle, respectful people, your cat needs places in the home that she can count on to be her own. Her feeding station and litter box areas need to be located where she can be undisturbed. If your children aren't old enough to understand that when kitty is eating or using the litter box she mustn't be bothered, then you'll have to set those areas up so only your cat can access them. It may mean putting the litter box in a room with a baby gate raised a few inches off the ground so your cat can go under but your children can't get through.



Photo by Alexander Possingham on Unsplash

For the feeding station you can do the same thing or place the food and water bowls on an elevated surface that your children can't reach. Just be sure your cat can easily climb to the spot.

Cats feel more secure when they have elevated options to escape interaction or even just to nap or watch what's happening outside the window. A multi-perched cat tree is a beneficial addition to the environment to provide vertical territory. Other options include window perches. You can also create vertical territory by installing cat shelves and cat walkways on the wall. Just be sure they are sturdy and covered in a non-slip material. If your cat feels she has the choice to engage or avoid interaction it will help ease tension.

As you look around your home, see what areas need some tweaking to ensure your cat has options for escape, vertical territory, and the ability to use her resources undisturbed.

Greeting a Cat

When two familiar cats approach each other they engage in a little scent exchange through *nose-to-nose sniffing*. After a nose-to-nose greeting, they'll decide if they want to continue the interaction or move farther apart. You can teach your children to do a variation on this greeting (they won't be using their noses, so don't worry) as a form of feline etiquette. If the cat approaches, have a child extend an index finger. If you have more than one child, only have one approach for each session. It will be overwhelming for the cat to have two or three kids moving in her direction or hovering over her.

If the child is approaching the cat, make sure he walks up to the cat very slowly. Running will cause the cat to feel as if she's being chased. It's important to show your child how close to get to the cat before extending his index finger. You don't want your child sticking a finger in the cat's face. The index finger should just be extended to give the cat the option to interact or avoid. He should present his index finger close enough to the cat but not so close that it causes her to feel it's an intrusion. Since you know your cat's personality and temperament, make sure her body language reflects a willingness to be approached. If your cat's ears are flattened back in airplane wing position or if there's growling or ANY display of reluctance, then this isn't the time to continue.

Make sure your child doesn't poke the cat's face or use his finger to tease. Demonstrate the correct technique so your child views his finger as a make-believe cat nose. If the cat wants to interact with your child, she'll sniff, rub against his finger or move closer. If she doesn't want more interaction, she'll stay still, turn away or move to create more distance.

Teach children how important scent is to cats and how they use it for information gathering, recognition and communication.

If your cat shows no interest in this exercise or sniffs the child's finger and backs away or turns away, it's still an important trust-building exercise because you've given the cat the choice. When she has choices, it helps prevent defensive reactions due to feeling trapped or threatened. That's the start of trust-building the beginning of a good relationship.

Open Hand Petting

Demonstrate the correct way to gently pet with an open hand and to only go in the direction the hair grows. Your cat may have specific areas of the body that are sensitive or no-touch zones, so make sure children know to stay clear of those spots. It's also important to teach children to never pet the cat's stomach, no matter how inviting it may look. If you have more than one cat, each one may have very different preferences so teach children that what one cat enjoys may not be a positive experience for another cat. Many young children pet by tapping and patting the cat and most cats find that uncomfortable. The way to pet is by doing smooth strokes. The area most cats enjoy being petted is on the back of the head. Some cats like long strokes down the back but for other cats that's too stimulating or too sensitive. You know your

individual cat's preferences so teach your children based on that. If you need to, have your children learn how to smoothly pet by practicing on a stuffed toy animal.

If your children are old enough to be aware of body language, show them the signs to look for that might mean the cat is not in the mood to interact. Teach the signs indicating that the cat is coming close to the end of her tolerance for being petted as well. With children too young to interpret body language, make sure you are always present if they want to pet the cat so you can monitor for everyone's safety.

Tell children that no matter how much the cat may enjoy their affection, if she moves away it means she has had enough and they should never follow her. Your cat needs choices when it comes to avoidance and interaction and that's how trust is maintained. If the experience with your children is positive then your cat will likely look forward to the next they want to pet her.

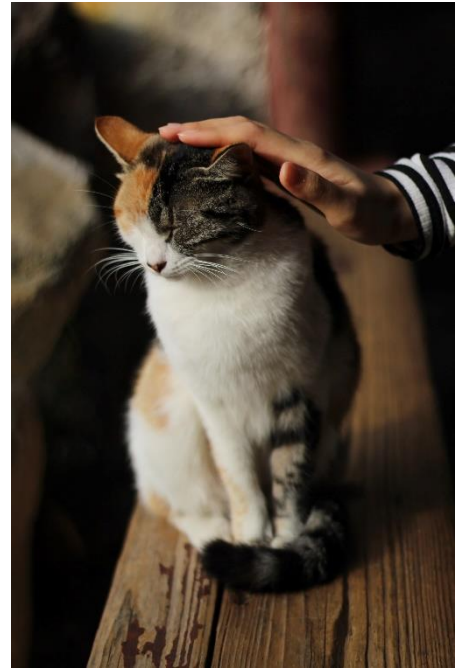


Photo by Marta Markes on Unsplash

Playtime

Playtime with the cat can be fun for children as long as they're instructed how to do it safely and you always supervise. Make it special by having your children pick out some cats toys (if they're old enough). Guide them toward a fishing pole-type toy because it will keep a safe distance between a child's hand and the cat's teeth or claws. Demonstrate how to conduct an interactive play session. Children need to learn never to poke the cat or tease her. It's also important to avoid frustrating the cat by waving the toy completely out of reach. Making the game fun and rewarding for the cat is the way to keep her interested in this session and future play sessions. If you have a child who is too young to use an interactive toy, try something easy, such as a peacock feather. Another idea for very young children is to use catnip bubbles, but make sure bubbles aren't blown in the cat's face. You can find catnip bubbles at your local pet product store and online. Don't use regular soap bubbles.

Training Can be Fun

If your children are old enough, try teaching them how to do clicker training. It's a positive and effective form of cat training. Demonstrate basic clicker training with a behavior as simple as getting the cat to sit, high-five or go in a circle. You can find information on clicker training in my book, *Think Like a Cat*. There are also numerous YouTube videos on clicker training basics that you and your children can watch to learn more about this fun and easy training technique.

Do Some Reading on Animals

Find some books on animals that are written specifically for children. The books don't have to be about pet care specifically. Books can contain stories about cats or dogs. Use this story time to deepen your children's compassion and understanding about what animals feel and communicate.

Set a Good Example

Your children will learn from observing how you treat the family pets. Demonstrate that cats need love, kindness, healthcare, the proper food, fresh water, comfort, and safety. You are a tremendous influence when it comes to how the relationship between your children and your cat develops and grows.

Need Help?

For more specific information on cat behavior and training, refer to my books, *Think Like a Cat* and *CatWise*. You can also check out the book *Cat vs. Cat*, which deals exclusively with multicat issues. The books are available at bookstores everywhere, through your favorite online book retail site and on the website, catbehaviorassociates.com. If you have a question regarding your cat's health, please contact your veterinarian. This article is not intended as a replacement for your cat's veterinary care and is not dispensing medical advice.

About Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat behavior columnist for *Cats* magazine, *Modern Cat* magazine, *The Daily Cat*, and *Cat Fancy* online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.



Pam owns Cat Behavior Associates, LLC, a veterinarian-referred cat behavior consultation business in Nashville, TN.