

Baby's Best Friends: Cats and babies

By Sarah Loch, Korat owner and new mother

This is a short tale of how we introduced our baby to our very established feline family and how easy the process has been. Those of you expecting a baby will no doubt be aware that many pregnancy and baby books recommend babies and cats be kept apart, but those amongst us who count their cats as family are obviously not going to be able to follow this advice. During my pregnancy, I found it extremely dispiriting, irritating and confusing to read that we would need to 'have someone mind the cat' in the early weeks for fear of the cat sleeping with and smothering the baby. We have four Korats, thoroughly beloved and very, very settled in their routines, and we also live in a small townhouse, so any advice to keep cats and baby separate was going to be extremely difficult to follow.

Before the big day

We have a good idea of our cats' behaviour and we know that two of the four are interested in children, whilst the other two make themselves scarce. To explore this further, we began asking friends with young and younger children to come and visit so we could see how the cats reacted. We actively encouraged the kids to play with the cats, or inquisitive toddlers to crawl towards them and we observed. It was a bit of a non-event. In most cases, most of the four would stay out of the way the entire time, save for a tantalising tail flick from one or two before retreating upstairs or outside for a sleep.

Tips

- Stock up on cat treats, cat food and litter
- Consider buying Feliway pheromone diffusers to reduce cats' anxiety to new noises, smells etc
- Create some appealing, new cat nests in quieter places in the house

The new arrival

As a brand new parent, it is very difficult to see beyond those early few months and imagine the new phases you will go through in the months ahead. Some of the more cat-sympathetic sources of advice suggest you begin altering your cats' routines (I'm thinking 'cats' in the plural sense as our small tribe of four has undoubtedly shaped the way we've gone about things) as soon as possible after discovering you're pregnant. For us, changing night time routines was something we always meant to do but it was just too hard and we never got around to it.

Imagine this scene: Amongst your cat clan, are two anxious cats you have re-homed and who are now thoroughly settled so long as nothing much changes. Ellie has her own room due to her 'special need' for private space, but Sumi will let nothing get between him and your pillow, preferably with your head on it. Supranee is usually amazingly easy going about night times, but only two months before the baby's birth, her buddy-cat Simon had major surgery (a leg amputation) which threw everything into flux. So, as you can imagine, it was simply not feasible for us to re-train our cats to sleep elsewhere at night in the months before our baby came. With younger and/or more adaptable kitties, it might be a much easier proposition though.

One thing about being pregnant, however, is that your own routine changes and the cats are sensitive to this. Due to a series of long, hot nights, I took to sleeping downstairs on the lounge where it was a little cooler and my regular trips to the bathroom and/or kitchen through the night, lights and fans going on and off, sitting up to read, eating cornflakes, moving cushions (and cats) around certainly played a part in letting the cats know something was up. The final clue came at 2am when it was time to go to the hospital, more lights on, bags out the door: life would never be the same again!

And baby makes seven...

Once Leo came home, he was immediately taken under Supranee's watchful, maternal eye. We noticed she would sit near him when we lay him on his rug and chase the other cats away. (This was on the rare occasion that one of the others showed much interest). This may sound a little alarming, but the truth is that parents of a new-born are never more than an arm's length away at any time and it's easy to nudge a cat away or pick your baby up if you are worried.



Figure 1 Leo a week old, with his babysitter Supranee

Deciding we wanted Leo to sleep in our bedroom, and not relishing a winter electricity bill which reflected heating a room per cat/person 24-7, we remained committed to co-existence. We bought a Valco brand crib on a stand which had a strong net stretched over a firm, fixed frame. With it zipped up there was no way a cat could touch the baby, however, for the curious, it was possible to sneak a look

through the mesh. Our graphic concerns of a cat lying inquisitively over the top of the hood, looking in at the sleeping baby and falling through onto the baby below proved completely implausible as with the baby's irregular, spontaneous and gut wrenching screams, our sensible cats either headed to another room altogether or shut their eyes tight and tried to imagine themselves someplace warm, sprinkled with catnip and cat treats to nibble.

We were mindful of the stress the sound of the crying and the regular lights-on interruptions through the nights may have had on the cats, but as we were doing our best to soothe our baby, we needed to rely on pats, cuddles, cat nip and cat treats to let the cats know we felt their pain and we still loved them.

Cats need:

- As this is a very hectic time (and it won't always be like this), focus on the basics: food, clean litter, and if possible, and the back door open to the cat enclosure or a quieter part of the house as an escape route
- Love and acknowledgement –a little goes a long way. When you're exhausted and trying to cope with a baby plus the myriad of unfamiliar tasks baby's bring with them, the cats do fall in priority (unless they scream and cry like Supranee does), but life will settle down in about three short months and your cats will forgive you
- To give you a cuddle. Standing in the kitchen surrounded by unwritten thank you cards, obstetrician bills, breast pumps, sterilising equipment, mountains of washing, defrosting lasagne (from the supply you made before you went to hospital but are now so sick of), just grab the closest cat and give them a cuddle.

Growing up

Our baby is now almost one and in addition to the vacuum cleaner, which he loves following around the house (???), he has four best-playmates. The cats are constantly making Leo laugh (when he sees them wander into his room first thing each morning), gasp in wonder (when they leap over him or onto his change table) and crawl (as he tries to follow them). They do not require batteries, and apart from our wonderful three-legged Simon, they can all jump over the baby gate when they want to escape. If you have a multi-cat household, you'll also realise how handy it is to have multiple cats in the same colour – the cats can rotate, appearing to entertain the baby only a couple of times a day so they don't get too overwhelmed, yet the baby is delighted!



Figure 2 About 6 months with Supranee close by

Supranee is still a very special companion, teaching our baby all about cats. She has endless patience and does not appear to mind being grabbed at by little hands that cannot yet pat. She endures having her feet, clumps of skin and fur and her tail pulled, and then comes back for more, meowing and nudging her head against the baby until he ‘plays’ with her again. Ellie will cruise past occasionally and Simon now sits at looks at the action at a safe distance through the baby gate. Sumi also gets within hand’s reach now but he is less patient than the saintly Supranee, so adult supervision is always present but then again- you always have to supervise a baby! Cats or no cats, you would not leave your baby alone. Remember, it’s also easy to pick up the cat/s and put them in another room.



Music appreciation



Supranee takes a moment to herself

As your baby gets older, you might need:

- A mosquito net over the cot- we used a ‘Babyhood’ net on a large frame but we need not have bothered. Whenever the baby is in bed asleep, his door is shut and the baby monitor is on. However, the net is a visible reminder to the cats not to jump up on the cot

- Baby gates/barriers to ‘fence off’ the cats’ food, litter, escape area/s (we made it to 8 months before our baby could crawl)
- Books about cats to engender more cat love! “Cat” by Matthew Van Fleet, Simon & Schuster (2009) is excellent
- To resurrect all the cat toys your cats have never ever played with – cat ticklers, balls with bells inside them, mice on wheels- these make great (older) baby toys!
- Camera – there will be so many lovely moments of baby and cat togetherness as your baby learns about how wonderful pets are in our lives

Paws for thought

It’s 11pm and Leo is crying for his bottle and a cuddle. Supranee is sitting with me as I type and she jumps down to let me know I’m needed (in case I have not heard!). I go to the nursery and Simon is already there, waiting at the door and ready to hop in to check on Leo himself (this is something Simon now does all through the night with me, getting up, hopping along each time I get up to Leo then stretching out on Leo’s floor while I feed or settle him), and Sumi is on the staircase, watching what’s going on. Ellie doesn’t really see the need to be overly involved yet, which is fine. She is probably looking forward to the day when Leo can sit on the lounge and let her sleep on his legs. That day will come!



Figure 3 Ellie takes a moment to recharge while Leo sleeps

Recommended reading:

The 'Mog & Me' series by Judith Kerr (2003), Harper Collins

Dog In, Cat Out by Gillian Rubinstein & Ann James (2007), Omnibus for Scholastic Australia