



Baby I love

Francesca Watson meets two Cats Protection staff members who know that cats and babies can be a winning combination...

Having a baby is one of the most amazing events in anyone's life and it will mean a whole change of lifestyle, attitude and routine, not least if you're a cat owner. With a little forethought and planning families and felines can live alongside each other very happily.

The importance of pets and kids should never be underestimated. Many children regard their cat as their best friend and it is through this friendship that important lessons are learned: trust, empathy, care and love, which help children become responsible and caring adults. There are many physical benefits for children too. A number of studies in the UK and USA report that exposure to pets during infancy may significantly reduce the risk of asthma and allergies in later childhood and it has been indicated that primary school children

from pet-owning households have lower sickness absenteeism from school. The benefits are many!

Sadly, however, Cats Protection receives many calls from prospective parents who feel they must give away their beloved cats as they mistakenly believe that having a baby and a cat in the same house is incompatible.

Joel Scott and Leanne Pilbeam both work for CP's National Cat Adoption Centre at Chelwood Gate in Sussex. As firm believers that cats and kids most definitely mix, they share their personal experiences with us.

Joel Scott – Deputy Manager

As I spend quite a lot of time trying to educate youngsters about cats, I believe it is important that children grow up with animals; it teaches them care, respect and love as well as many other things. Children benefit so much from having animals in their life. We have many cats brought into Cats Protection because of new babies, which is a real shame because with a little thought and organisation both cats and kids can live happily together.

When my wife Charlotte and I found out we were going to have a baby it really was the most superb news I had ever heard. Although really exciting, it hit me how much our lives were going to change – I wondered how Penny and Pepper, our two splendid Persian girls, would take to the new arrival.

After Charlotte became pregnant, Pepper became very attached to her belly. As soon as Charlotte sat down Pepper was there snuggling up to her and she seemed to sense something was going on.

As we started to organise the nursery, the cats were very interested by all the new baby equipment and started sniffing and rubbing everything just to make sure it was safe. Pepper likes to get in things like boxes, bags – anything she can fit into really – and instantly took a liking to the Moses basket. Our way round that was to cover it with a net; she didn't take any notice of it then.

The new arrival

Evangeline Hope Scott was born on the 25 February 2012 and it was the most wonderful experience of my life. Charlotte was in hospital for a couple of days so I had to nip home from hospital to feed the cats, clean their litter trays and give them a fuss. When Charlotte and Evangeline came home, I was delighted how the cats took to having the baby around; they didn't mind the crying and Pepper even upped her maternal ways, becoming extra cuddly!

Cats are creatures of habit, so keeping in a routine helps them settle with a new person or animal. As always I keep up good litter tray hygiene, washing my hands regularly. At night the cats are kept in the living room and kitchen, separating them from our bedroom. Cats like to have places to hide – which during the day is under the bed for Pepper – and to have their litter trays, food and water bowls placed in quiet areas of the house. It's also important to provide plenty of toys and enrichment.

We have recently moved to a larger house and have taken on another Persian, Matilda, a very playful tortoiseshell. We have all settled in nicely and haven't had any issues or problems. The cats haven't tried to get into the Moses basket but it is always sensible to be vigilant – I'm sure they would soon move if Evangeline started screaming anyway!

Penny stands guard over Evangeline

Leanne Pilbeam, Receptionist

I grew up with a cat and as an adult we have always had cats in our household, so when I fell pregnant I began to think about the best way forward. Having worked on the reception at Cats Protection for a long time I was used to frequent calls saying: "I'm having a baby so I need to rehome my cats." There are still a lot of people who see pregnancy as a reason for rehoming their cats, but I did not, and still don't, see why the two are mutually exclusive.

Preparation is key

I began to research how best to tackle the issue and the best piece of advice I came across was to get the house and the cats ready for a baby and the new routine **before** the baby arrived. So once I had had my 12-week scan and I knew everything was alright we gradually started adapting the house for our baby. We cleared the nursery and started shutting the cats out of that room. We bought covered litter trays to replace the open ones and we gradually moved the litter trays to areas of the house where the baby would not be. We put one in the downstairs toilet and even cut a cat flap in the door! This meant the cats could do their business in peace. We cleared special sleeping areas for the cats up high and in the bedrooms. We got cat nets for the Moses basket and cot and we set everything up for the baby. As this was done over time and before the baby arrived the cats had time to get used to it and adapt to all the changes.

When Russell was born it was a difficult birth and we were in hospital for a few days so when we finally got home the cats were quite unsettled and upset – they were also terrified of Russell! We tried our best to reassure them and give them ▶



Photo: Joel Scott



Photo: Leanne Pilbeam

Russell and Moonbeam take a well-earned nap

attention and over time they settled and got used to our new arrival. We always encouraged the cats to spend time with Russell – to smell him and rub up against him – and we encouraged Russell to try and stroke the cats as early as we could. I believe it is important to encourage positive interactions. If you are always trying to keep them separate then tensions can arise. I think it is also important to make the cats feel involved and a part of the new family, as the feeling of being pushed out or replaced can also lead to behavioural problems from them.

Consolidation

Now Russell is two-and-a-half years old and I believe having the cats has enriched his life. He has learned to be gentle and considerate to them. It has involved constant reminders on my part not to chase them...sit on them...grab their legs...but he is really starting to understand now.

He helps me call them in at night, get the cat food out the cupboard and put the food bowls down for them. When our cat, Whiskers, was unwell and had to go to the vets recently he helped to look after her and he was constantly checking she was ok. The cats are still a bit wary of Russell and more often than not they will retire upstairs away from all the noise, but more and more often we are now finding them snuggled up with Russell enjoying a big cuddle or tickle.

There are lots of old wives' tales warning about cats while pregnant or with babies and if I had a pound for every time someone said to me, "Are you going to have to rehome the cats now?" I would be a rich woman, but my advice would be to at least give it a go.

I think having cats has helped with Russell's emotional development in many ways and also with his speech development. On a wider note, if we can bring up the next generation of children with an inbuilt kindness and compassion for animals and an understanding of their needs surely this can only be a good thing? ●

Practical tips!

Before baby arrives:

- Make sure your cat is in good health by taking him for a check-up at the vet
- If your cat is not neutered, get this done without delay
- Pregnant women should wear gloves and apron when clearing the litter tray – or better still, get someone else to do it!
- Introduce your cat to any baby items you buy, such as nursery furniture or prams – let your cat investigate but don't let him climb on them – and then keep them shut away. It is important to ensure the items are off limits because some will be very tempting places for your cat to sleep
- Begin getting your cat used to the sounds of the baby. Record a friend or relative's baby, or buy a CD that you can play on a very low volume to begin with and gradually increase the noise. Crying can be worrying for a cat that hasn't heard it before

Once baby has arrived:

Do:

- Use a safe cot or pram net to keep the cat at bay – pull it taut to deter your cat from using it as a bed
- Keep the nursery inaccessible to your cat while the baby is asleep and make sure any open windows are cat proof
- Keep all of the baby's feeding utensils out of the cat's reach
- Keep the baby and cat food separately, you don't want to get them mixed up in a sleep-deprived moment!
- Try and set aside a part of the day to make a fuss of your cat as it's important that his normal routines are maintained and it will give you a chance to grab a quiet moment and relax
- Remember your cat should be regularly treated for fleas and worms and his litter tray kept clean
- Provide your cat with a high window sill, cupboard top or add some cat shelves so they can keep out of the way but still observe
- Teach children not to disturb the cat while he is in his safe place, sleeping, eating or using the litter tray

And don't:

- Leave a baby and a cat together unsupervised, even if you trust your cat 100 per cent
- Leave any children's sandboxes uncovered, allowing cats to use it as a giant litter tray

A constant friend

Continuing the theme of cats and kids, *Elise Roberts* gives us an insight into the importance of cats in her life...

My name is Elise. I am 11 years old and have Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome [a group of inherited connective tissue disorders] which means I have to spend a lot of time home with my Mum and cannot interact with other children as much, which means I can get very lonely. When we first went to the National Cat Adoption Centre (NCAC) it was very thrilling because I got to stroke all sorts of cats. "Remember, no more cats," my Mum used to say as we already had 13-year-old Smokey, our cat at home, and two others at my Dad's house, two-year-olds Rue and Jiji.

My illness means I have to have a feeding tube, which of course makes a brilliant cat toy for all the cats I live with, so I have to be careful. In early April my Mum and I kept on going back to the NCAC and repeatedly falling in love with fluffy cats, trying to find ways to drag ourselves away. On one of our previous trips we met a cat called Beryl. She was old, but my Mum had fallen head over heels in love with this little cat.

After spending ages preparing for Beryl and having our home visit and adoption approved, we went back there to finally pick her up. When we got there, as we hadn't reserved her, we crossed our fingers that she would still be there. It had only been a day since we saw her, of course she was going to be there, waiting for us! But no, she was gone, and as much as we were upset, we were also happy for her. Gloomily, we went to look around and see new cats and after a while, we cheered up enough to actually stroke some and just feel lucky that we were going to get a new cat.

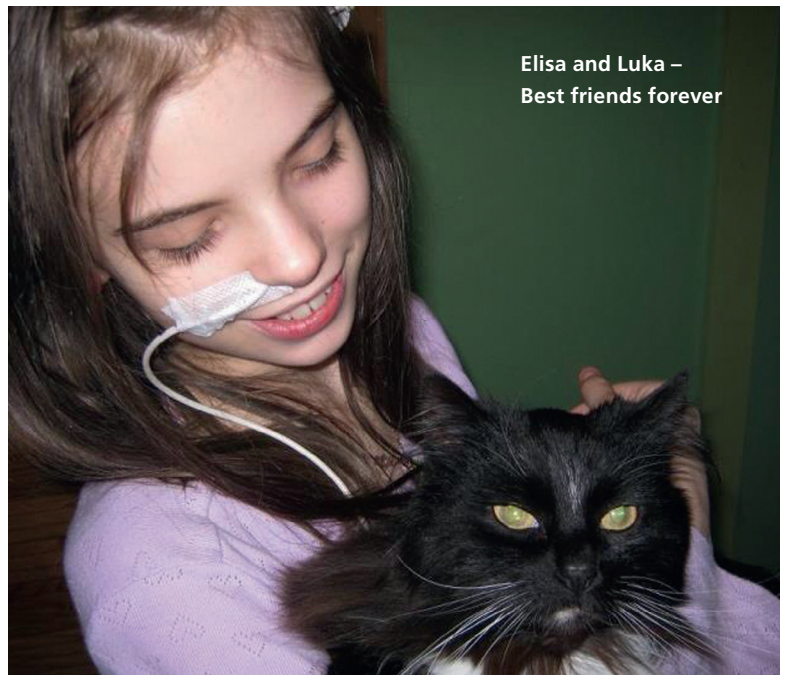
You've got to have Faith

Looking around, we met Faith who was dribbly and got along with me rather well considering we were new to her. She was black and white with a blended brown tummy and extremely fluffy. Her purr sounded as if it were an engine – although, no miaowing – and she dribbled like a dog! We were so happy, we went into the socialising room to see her and she immediately came over for cuddles, curling up on my lap. Looking down, her fur and dribble had spread all over my legs but her shining green eyes stared at me innocently. They said she was very dribbly and they had to even trim her neck fur because it got so tangled and knotted. When we were in there, the Cat Care Assistant told me how her previous home had a lot of chaos and as such she wasn't suitable for a home with lots of other animals and younger, more excitable kids.

This time, we reserved her, leaving her with a pillow so she could get used to our scent. The next day, Mum and I came in and took her home. Faith sat on my lap, because I am in a wheelchair, and Mum talked to the receptionist. "Good girl, it's going to be all right," we whispered to her with her quietly miaowing with confusion and worry. When we finally got her home, she ran under the bed, of course, but once things had calmed down and my Mum had left, I sneaked back in and persuaded her to sit on my lap and have a cuddle. Jo, my sister, wasn't keen on getting a new cat because she was worried for Smokey and didn't want to anger him. But when she saw and cuddled Faith, she was instantly in love. The only thing that was a problem for her was that she didn't like the name Faith. After a week of squabbling over what the name should be, we finally came up with Luka.

A new beginning

Luka finally settled in with me, Mum and Jo. She was aware that Smokey was in the house and he was aware of her. She was so nervous she could barely look outside the door, let alone spend some time outside my room, where she was staying. Luka is confident and brilliant with people but shy and timid with animals so we have trouble getting her out of the room. Whenever she comes downstairs, a single movement or a peep of noise and you can see her scuttling off back upstairs. She has been with us for a while now and she is finally getting comfortable with short trips downstairs. Everyone who has met her has wanted to take her home because she is a long-haired, six-year-old, beautiful bundle of love! I will never forget how ill and upset I was until I met Luka and how much my life improved once I had an everyday friend to keep me company at home and to distract me when I'm at my worst. Everyone cherishes her and to me, she isn't just a cat, she's a perfect cat! ●



Elisa and Luka –
Best friends forever