



Babies and Cats

Dispelling the Myths

By Sarah Thexton

Early in June 2004 Chris and I discovered that we were expecting our first child. It was wonderful news for us as we had been told that we would never be able to have children. As both of us were nearing 40 time was running out for us to start a family and the pregnancy could not have happened at a better time. Of course it was not as though we did not already have quite a collection of four legged children. Our menagerie consisted of 4 cats (two Siamese, a Russian Blue and a black Oriental) and 2 dogs. We are both involved in the cat fancy with two of our cats having achieved Supreme Premier Status and we have already discussed adding to our feline clan. Chris is keen to get a British Shorthair and I have always wanted another Oriental. On the canine side we have a German Shepherd and a German Shepherd Cross and both of these dogs are used to a substantial amount of attention. I participate in a local Dog School and Chris enjoys running with his dog in the mornings. We realized that if we were to maintain a happy family we could not start neglecting the animals once the baby arrived. We acknowledged that it would not be easy to find time to keep up our activity with our animals but we were determined to find a balance.

What really amazed us was the reaction that people had when they found out that I was pregnant. After the initial congratulations a number of them would ask what we intended doing with our animals. The biggest concern that people seemed to have was around our cats and a few even went to so far as to ask us if the cats would be put to sleep. When we told people that we had no intention of changing anything about our animals we were often met with disapproving glances and horror stories about cats smothering babies. Some people even went so far as to tell us that Siamese could be evil with children and would maliciously hurt a baby. Of course they could all "quote" third and fourth hand tales that they had heard via the grape vine.



Our lilacpoint Siamese started developing a bond with Emma Jane

All through this we remained determined to keep things as they were. The baby would have her own room and the cats would continue to sleep in our bed. I would train my dog until a week before the birth and would return to training two weeks after. It proved not to be as easy as we thought it would but somehow we managed. We traveled to Cape Town to a cat show when I was 6 months pregnant and flew to America on Holiday when I was 7 months pregnant. Life continued pretty much as it had done.

Then on 4 January 2005 I checked into St Georges Hospital for a Caesarian section and Emma Jane arrived at 07h34. The day before I left hospital I asked the Pediatrician how to handle the situation with the cats. His response was to carry on as normal. He felt that a child exposed to cats in the first months of their life would be less likely to have animal allergies later on. So armed with this information we went home and introduced the baby to the animals. To be honest the cats were not really interested. They gave the baby a few good sniffs and then spent the balance of the week trying to remove the mobile from the cot. Our little lilac Siamese developed a taste for formula and stole a few bottles before we cottoned on and started keeping everything out of the reach of the cats. After two weeks our black oriental and our lilacpoint Siamese started developing a bond with the baby. We would find them sitting in the cot near her or on the floor next to her playgym. Never once were they on top of her and never once did they attempt to do her any harm. They would sit and look at her and just enjoy being close to her. They were however quick to move out of the way of little hands and feet that moved a lot quicker than anyone realized. The harmony in our home has continued just as it was before the latest arrival. Everyone has their place and everyone belongs here.

Animal Welfare Societies received regular phone calls from women who are pregnant and want to dispose of their cats.



Lize-Mari loves her
Maine Coon cat Pinball



Photo by Nicci Gerber

These people are not even embarrassed to make the call. They state matter of factly that they are pregnant and therefore the cats must go. It is a step that is viewed as a natural progression.

These poor animals are cast aside into often-overcrowded animal shelters and are usually destroyed within a few weeks. If anyone who reads this is pregnant and having the same thoughts I would urge them to consider the facts.

1. Cats do not smother babies by lying on their faces. A cat may cuddle next to the baby, as it is warm and cozy but will not attempt to smother it. They don't stay there very long anyway as babies are active and inclined to kick out. If you are still concerned keep the babies bedroom door shut at night and use a baby monitor. After the first few days the cats generally lose interest in the new addition anyway. We also brought the cot, pram and other baby furniture a few months prior to the baby's arrival and let the cats explore it. This way it was no a novelty when the baby arrived and had long since gone out of favor.
2. A cat will not harm a baby deliberately. When did you last see a cat walk up to a human being and scratch out deliberately? Cats are not by nature vindictive and do not harbor feelings of jealousy or nastiness. They are generally quite happy to take their place in the universe and enjoy any attention that comes their way. When people relay these "horror" stories to you I would urge you to ask them if they had ever experienced these events personally. In most cases you will find the stories are third or even fourth hand.
3. Having a baby around animals will not increase its chances of having an allergy. Recent research has proved that babies who live in a multi animal household have a far lower incidence of allergies than those who live in a pet free environment. When I checked out of hospital and told the pediatrician that we had 4 cats his response was that we should get a few more. It is too early to tell if Emma will in any way be allergic but to date there are no signs of it.
4. Cats have the potential to carry a condition called Toxoplasmosis, which can be dangerous if passed onto the unborn fetus. It is however only passed on by contact with a cat's excrement and changing a cat's litter pan wearing gloves or using a small trowel can avoid this. Even women who do not have cats should use gloves while gardening as neighborhood cats could have used the garden as a convenient kitty toilet. If your cat does not have a kitty box this condition does not pose a risk. If your cat has been in contact with this condition the chances are that you already have immunity to it and your doctor can test for this.

It is important to remember that animals are for life. If you are considering falling pregnant and harbor any doubts whatsoever then a pet is not for you. An animal does not ask to come into our lives and once we put it there we owe it the best possible existence that we can give it. There are too many unwanted animals going into shelters on a daily basis and this number does not need adding to.

A child who grows up in a pet filled home will know the joy and love that a small animal can bring. I sincerely hope that one of my daughter's first memories will be of a small lilacpoint Siamese that is cuddled up next to her.



Elmi (13 months) was sooooo excited when she saw Granny's fifteen Burmese kittens running and playing all around the house. The kittens were between eight and nine weeks old at that stage, very confident and not at all afraid of their new 'toy'. They followed her, jumped onto her, sniffed at her and played with her. The way she touched them was truly amazing. It was as if she knew that they were also only babies and handled them ever so gently. When their visit was over Grandpa decided that no child should grow up without a pet - meaning, of course, a Burmese, the cat-dog. Two pets in one!

Lallie & Elmi de Wet