

Developmental stages of infants and children and potential impacts on domestic cats

Direct empirical research linking specific child developmental stages to feline behavioural outcomes remains limited. To this author’s knowledge, no peer-reviewed study has yet mapped child age stages to feline behavioural risk in the way Love and Overall’s (2001) developmental model did for dogs. The framework presented here adapts that structure for cats by bringing together established paediatric developmental knowledge with peer-reviewed research on feline welfare, stress, and handling, alongside clinical behavioural practice. The table, therefore, offers a structured way to anticipate likely interactions between children and cats, rather than claiming experimentally proven age-specific outcomes.



Age of child	Key developmental milestones	Typical child behaviours affecting cats	Common feline body language (early → late)	Typical cat behavioural responses	Potential welfare or safety risks
0 to 6 months	Crying, vocalisations, limb waving, rolling, sitting	Sudden crying sounds, novel odours, new furniture and equipment, unpredictable arm movements	Ear rotation sideways or back, head turn away, pausing, startle jump, crouching, tail tip twitch	Increased vigilance, withdrawal, hiding, reduced proximity to shared spaces	Elevated stress, space avoidance, defensive scratching if startled at close range
6 to 24 months	Crawling, pulling to stand, grasping, object exploration	Approaching cats, grabbing fur or tail, reaching towards resting cats, loud babbling	Tail flicking, skin rippling, tension through shoulders, ears flattened, pupils dilated (context-dependent)	Flight to height or hiding, freezing if escape is blocked, occasional defensive swat or scratch	Defensive scratching or biting if cornered, chronic stress if retreat spaces are inaccessible
2 to 4 years	Walking, running, climbing, emerging autonomy, limited impulse control	Chasing cats, blocking pathways, attempting to hug or restrain, interrupting resting cats	Rapid tail lashing, piloerection, crouched posture, hard stare, growl or hiss	Immediate flight, hiding, avoidance of child, defensive aggression if escape is prevented	Injury risk to child, persistent feline anxiety, reduced use of communal areas



Age of child	Key developmental milestones	Typical child behaviours affecting cats	Common feline body language (early → late)	Typical cat behavioural responses	Potential welfare or safety risks
4 to 7 years	Improved motor control, curiosity, role play, developing empathy	Directed attempts to stroke cats, offering food, calling cats over	Ear rotation, tail tip twitch, brief freeze, approach–withdraw cycles, solicitation when calm	Selective approach, disengagement when overstimulated	Misinterpretation of feline tolerance, risk of scratches if contact continues beyond threshold
7 to 10 years	Rule learning, improved reasoning, cooperative play	Following handling guidance, supervised care, structured play	Relaxed posture, slow blinking, tail upright with curved tip, cheek rubbing	Increased affiliative behaviour when interactions are predictable and consent-based	Opportunity for positive child–cat relationships when consent protocols are modelled
10+ years	Abstract reasoning, sustained attention, responsibility	Participation in feeding, grooming, enrichment routines	Stable relaxed postures, solicitation, social rubbing, grooming in proximity	Predictable social relationships, shared routines	Low risk when child respects feline choice and supervision is maintained

Implications for cats and children in the home

Cats rely on predictable environments and the ability to choose distance and contact to feel safe. As infants grow into mobile, curious children, those choices can become harder for cats to maintain, increasing the likelihood of stress or defensive behaviour. Preparing cats gradually for baby-related changes and teaching children respectful, consent-based interaction supports welfare and safety for both. Where concerns arise, or when families are expecting a baby, guidance from a certified feline behaviour practitioner can help ensure humane and secure outcomes, with UK-registered practitioners listed through the [Animal Behaviour & Training Council \(ABTC\)](#).

(References: [Amat et al., 2009](#); [Amat et al., 2015](#); [Ellis et al., 2013](#); [CDC, 2025](#); [Love and Overall, 2001](#); [Misirliyan et al., 2023](#); [NHS, 2023](#); [NIDCD, 2023](#); [Roden et al., 2011](#))

