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Is Getting A Cat Spayed Unimaginably Cruel?

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Cats wearing cones on their heads are not what you might call dignified.

Ninja, our six-month-old adoptee (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/our-newest-aggravating-family-member-was-ravaged-by-ticks-when-we-first-met>) seems to think she can slowly back away from the cone attached to her head and magically pop free. It doesn't work. She just spends most of her day walking backwards in frustration.

We recently got Ninja spayed and the cone is necessary to restrain her from gnawing on her stitches. With Bob Barker's mantra ringing in my ears — "Help control the pet population. Have your pets spayed or neutered." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZytpnElPI_E) — I always assumed that getting cats "fixed" was the ethical and responsible thing to do.

My kids see it differently. To them, it's unimaginably cruel.

Joseph Wilson and his family took in a cat — a cat that had already endured a pretty harrowing beginning.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/our-newest-aggravating-family-member-was-ravaged-by-ticks-when-we-first-met>)

What About What Ninja Wants?

“She’s not going to be able to have kids?!!!” says Sonia, when we tell her about Ninja’s upcoming appointment. “That’s so mean!”

“She won’t have a family,” says Elizabeth, dejectedly.

“Well... we’re her family,” I offer weakly.

“But she wants children of her own,” says Sonia, gesturing around to our full dinner table (three kids, two adults).

“It’s not the same for her...” I say, although I start to feel guilty.

Human Intervention

Later I would read an anecdote in Pamela Druckerman’s *Bringing Up Bébé* about a mother she met in France who allowed her female cat to have one litter of kittens before she had her spayed. “I wanted her to have that experience,” she said.

I assemble an arsenal of talking points for the next day’s dinner.

“She’ll live longer if she’s spayed,” I say (39 per cent longer on average, apparently (<https://www.petfinder.com/blog/2013/05/report-says-spayed-and-neutered-pets-live-longer/>)).

Sonia and Elizabeth then unleashed a nuanced argument that quality of life is more important than length of life as a proxy for happiness.

“She will also be yowling all the time and will attract the male cats in the neighbourhood,” I say. On cue, a few days later, a male cat starts prowling around our front stoop as if he knows the window of courtship is closing. Ninja climbs the screen door like Spider-Man.

“She’s in love!” says Sonia. I shoo the cat away, much to her disappointment.

Later I also tell them that if we don’t get Ninja spayed, she could have dozens of litters over her lifetime.

“That’s not just four or five kittens,” I say. “She could have up to 180 kittens over her lifetime!” This is not the persuasive argument I think it is.

Not one to shy away from tricky subjects, here's how a happy squirrel played a part in Joseph Wilson's kid-accessible meditation on death.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/were-all-going-to-die-how-i-explained-that-to-my-5-year-old>)

Cats, Consequences And Kids

“180 kittens!” says Marie, our youngest daughter. “*That* would be amazing!”

I remind her that all those kittens (unlike the versions in *Minecraft* she has so much fun clicking into existence) spend most of their time pooping and peeing all over the place.

“You’re not even giving her a choice,” says Sonia in the end. But in our house, choice is something that is reserved for those who understand consequences (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/parenting-democracy-dictatorship>). That applies to both human and non-human species.

In the end, as parents you do what you feel is best for your family.

So, now Ninja is wobbling around the house recovering from her surgery. My kids did succeed in planting a small seed of guilt in me, however, and that’s something I feel whenever I see Ninja try and shake the cone off her head. It’s like a symbol of the constraints we have placed on her reproductive freedom.

As the kids gently stroke her and watch her heal, I explain that even though she won’t have 180 of her own family members, perhaps we can provide surrogate familial bonds to keep her happy. Plus, in two weeks we can finally take off the cone and Ninja’s reproductive status will be less obvious.

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