

INTRODUCING A NEW BABY AND A PET

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The addition of a new baby to a household can upset both the social environment of that household and the pets of the household. Steps can be taken to greatly reduce the probability of this happening. These instructions are primarily designed for two-parent families. However, it is possible to implement most of the instructions if only one parent is available; notations about this have been made throughout. Please remember that no animal should be left alone unsupervised with an infant for any reason. This is not because most animals are innately aggressive towards infants, but rather because no infant would be capable of pushing an animal away if that animal cuddles up to them for either love or heat. Until your child is old enough to behave absolutely appropriately with your pet (and that could be as old as 10 years of age), do not leave them together unattended. This protects both your child and your pet.

STEP 1

Before your baby arrives, get your pet used to a regular feeding schedule that you believe is realistic and that will be kept when the infant is present. This schedule will probably be radically different from the current schedule, and it is best that your pet does not experience all the changes at once when your baby arrives. Include in the schedule a 5-10 minute period daily when you will attend only to your pet's needs. This period will represent its quality time and can occur in either one bout or two. During this time pat the animal, groom it, scratch it, play with toys, talk to it, massage it, and so on. Maintain the schedule no matter what, and make it one that can be implemented in the presence of the infant. This may necessitate setting an alarm clock 5 minutes earlier or agreeing that even if a baby cries at some point, you will not interrupt the interaction with the pet during those periods if the baby is not overly distressed and if the pet is not distressed by the child's cries. You might also find that this is a time that you can set aside for you to relax. Be realistic and do not feel guilty. 5-10 minutes of concentrated attention is probably more time than you give the animal as a block now. Although everybody will have to adjust to infants' schedule, this is one way that you can tell an animal that it is still important to you and it counts. Realize that if you have multiple pets, each will need at least 5 minutes of undivided attention each day. If you have pets that get along particularly well with each other, you can certainly team them up, but remember that the more animals you have, the more difficult it will be to give them all the things they need.

STEP 2

Start the dog on a leash-walking schedule that you anticipate can be maintained with a baby. Make your schedule realistic and implement it before the arrival of your child. It would be preferable if the schedule changes could be made as early as possible before the arrival of your child. This is a good time to consider changing the mechanism you use to walk your dog. If you are using a choke collar or a regular buckle collar and the dog does not behave properly instantaneously, now is the time to teach the dog to walk in a head halter (either a Halti or a gentle leader) or to teach it to walk on a no-pull harness (Lupi or Sporn harness). This is the time to get your pet under control so that you are able to take the dog with you everywhere you go with the baby where dogs are welcome. In addition, you do not want to struggle with a baby in a backpack or in a stroller and a dog that is pulling - a potentially dangerous scenario. You may want the protection of the dog, the company of the dog, and the necessary exercise for the dog when you are with the baby. A well-controlled dog will give you this. In addition if you are unable to take the dog everywhere you take the baby, the dog will learn that the baby has displaced it in that role in the family. Although it is inappropriate to use terms such as jealousy when discussing the manner in which the pet treats the baby, any dog or cat will realize that it is not getting the same amount of attention. Pets will also realize that this attention has been transferred to another individual. This phenomenon could then promote attention-seeking behaviors that are designed to be competitive with the attention the infant is now getting. The more often you can exercise the dog (or cat, if the cat enjoys exercise) with the child, the better everyone's relationship will be.

STEP 3

Again, before the baby arrives, allow your pet to explore the baby's sleeping and diaper changing area. For the same reasons discussed previously, do not wholly exclude your dog/cat from every place the baby will be. These areas will provide smells that are interesting to your pet, let them become familiar with them. Let them become accustomed to baby powders, lotions, diapers and other baby objects by sniffing at them. Some pets will paw or nose them. If the dog or cat tries to drag any of the baby items away, correct it by telling it "NO" and ask for the animal to drop it. If you are unable to get the animal to relinquish the item then now is the time to start teaching your dog or cat more appropriate manners such as "sit", "stay", "down", "drop it" etc. If your dog cannot do these before the arrival of your baby then you will have serious problems. Now is the time, whilst you still have it, to address this.

Do not let your pet make a habit of sleeping in or on any of the baby's furniture. It will only seem like a further correction when you do not allow it once the baby arrives. Do however let the animal become familiar with the area.

If your pet has stuffed toys, expect that it will think it can play with the baby's toys. If you are willing to wash these, there is nothing wrong from a health standpoint; however, the big problem will be that the dog may round up and take all of the infant's toys. As the baby ages the dog may drag the toys from the baby's hand. Babies can be unintentionally injured under such circumstances. It may be preferable to shift the dog to toys that do not closely resemble the toys the baby may have. Such toys can have different scents or sounds associated with them.

STEP 4

When the baby is born, have your partner (or whoever is caring for the pet at that time) take home some articles of clothing that the baby has used. This will teach the animal that these new clothing smells are part of its new repertoire, but also that there is an infant involved. Allow your pet to smell these items and leave them around the house. It is best to make arrangements for your pet to be cared for in your home in advance of the arrival of your new baby. This decreases your pet's stress level. Being moved around or kennelled can cause fear and anxiety. The pet can then learn to associate the advent of this fear and anxiety with the arrival of a new baby.

STEP 5

When you first come home, have someone else hold your baby whilst you go in and greet the animals. Greet them exuberantly, your pets will have missed you. You may want to introduce any jumping dogs or dogs that are difficult to control on a leash. Your baby needs to be kept out of the way until everything is back to normal and the pets are calm again, this may take 15-30 minutes.

STEP 6

Once the initial pandemonium has ceased you are ready to start formally introducing your pets to the new baby. Your partner should sit comfortably on the couch holding the baby. You can then be responsible for controlling and monitoring the pets. Allow your pet to smell the baby and explore. Pets should be leashed or otherwise restrained in case they make any sudden aggressive (or even nonaggressive) movements towards the baby. If the pet is fearful of the baby, talk to it gently, rub its ears, and encourage it to smell the infant. Do not hold or dangle the child in front of the pet, it may encourage the pet to lunge at the baby. If you are

alone, you can put a harness on the pet and tie the harness to solid, stationary pieces of furniture with a leash. You can then sit down at a distance where the pet can sniff the infant but not lunge. You can then still verbally reward your pet while enforcing this safe distance. Remember to be calm at all times. Although one lick may be acceptable, you should be able to tell the animal to stop instantly. If the animal is unable to respond to a verbal caution, licking is not acceptable. If the animal hisses or growls at the infant, you must be able to verbally correct these behaviors. If not, take the animal and put it into another room until it is calm. As soon as it is calm, you can try this again in the same circumstances. Do not reassure the pets that it is “okay” and that “mommy” and “daddy” still love them; any aggressive behavior towards an infant is not O.K. The animal must learn that if it wants favorable attention from you, it must behave in a favorable manner towards the newest addition to the family. If you have trouble getting the pet to calm down or respond to verbal commands (this may be especially true in cats) you can try using a water pistol. Squirt the animal as it begins to hiss or look aggressive. Remember that the point of any correction is to startle the animal so it aborts the behavior, and you can then reinforce a more appropriate *behavior*. The point of these corrections is not to terrify the animal. Corrections are best done in the first 30 seconds of the beginning of the behavioral sequence, and that sequence usually starts with a look. Cats’ eyes usually become huge, the ears are move back, the hair is up, and the cat may arch its back, duck its neck and retract its lips or sound nasty.

STEP 7

When there is only one spouse at home with the infant during the first few weeks, pets should be restrained or confined in the presence of the baby. If the pet is a dog it can be leashed at a distance as described above. The animal can still be close to the baby and be petted by you. Make sure that the full extent of the animal’s reach, including the head and neck is at least one dog length away from the child. Cats are more difficult but many adjust well to harnesses and leashes: otherwise, many cats do not object to being banished from the room for short periods of time.

STEP 8

If, after 3 weeks or so, your pet accepts the baby with no untoward behavior, it can be unleashed. Regardless, the pet still needs to be closely supervised and observed. It is best if one spouse attends to the baby whilst the other attends to the pet. It is important that you and your spouse share these roles, rather than always doing the same one. For dogs that do not respond well to voice commands and for whom the baby is a strong stimulus, the dog should never be left alone with the child, even in passing, until the child can fend for itself. Please

do not believe that a muzzle can protect an infant or young child from damage from a dog. Muzzles may prevent bites, but they do not dissuade the dog from lunging and pushing on the child. Serious injuries can occur if a dog lands on a child in play without the intention of doing damage.

STEP 9

If the pet does not pose a hazard (tripping, falling, jumping, grabbing) and they are truly just being social, there is no reason, once they are accustomed to the new baby, that they cannot accompany the parent around the house and be with the baby while he or she is being changed, bathed and so on. In fact this helps facilitate the future interaction between the child and the pet. Regardless, any dog so treated should be very responsive to voice commands so that no struggle should ever ensue in getting the dog to comply with a desired behavior.

STEP 10

Under no circumstances should any pet be allowed to sleep in a room with an unattended infant or young child. Predatory tendencies are far less of a concern than is the fact that a dog or cat could inadvertently smother a child.

STEP 11

If the pet is aggressive or frightened around the child, you should start exposing the pet to children very gradually. Go back to steps 5 and 6. Predatory aggression is the most common form of aggression shown by dogs to very young infants, whereas aggression caused by pain or fear is frequently associated with older children (18-36 months of age). These children are often uncoordinated and may inadvertently hurt a pet by their play or their ambulatory capabilities. Older pets that may be arthritic or that have painful hips or shoulders are particularly at risk, as are those with chronic ear conditions. These are areas that children frequently grab. Young children should be taught to treat pets gently: no pulling, no tugging and no pounding on them. Again, this is especially important if the pet is old, ill or arthritic because any dog that is in pain may use a bite as its only defense against a rambunctious child.