

Introducing a Baby to Pets

Ten little fingers and ten little toes...and four paws? How do you prepare for bringing home a new baby, when you have a dog (or cat) at home already? Will they get along; will the current “baby” of the house feel neglected at all of the attention that the new baby receives? Here’s some help to make the transition a little easier on all of you.



The ways to create a special bond between children and pets are preparation and maintenance. You can prepare your current family members before you are pregnant, or as soon as you find out. It’s never too late!

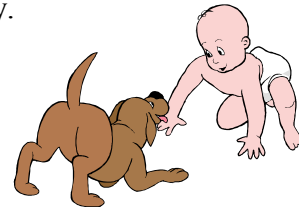
Preparation

- Veterinary Care: To protect your child, make sure that your companion animals are current on all vaccinations, monthly parasite preventatives, and are in good general health.
- Neuter and Spay: Sterilized animals are much easier to train and their behavior is more predictable...not to mention it prevents unplanned and costly litters, decreases undesirable behavior, and has well known health benefits.
- Obedience Training: Make sure you and your pet(s) understand “pack leadership” and basic commands (sit, down, off, stay, drop it). Practice in many different situations and those that will resemble “baby” activities. Have your dog trained to “go potty” on command. Get them used to their food bowl being handled, and teach them to take treats only on command. Provide toys that do not resemble baby toys, to avoid confusion later.
- New Smells and Sounds: Get your pet used to any new laundry detergent (washing the pet’s bedding, and any new baby clothes ahead of time will help), lotions, soaps, etc. so that your pet will not find the new scent such a shock later on. If possible, get your companion animal(s) used to the sound of a crying baby (either a tape, or a friend/family member).
- The Nursery: Dogs and cats are creatures of habit, and any adjustment in their daily routine can upset them. Allowing your pet(s) to explore the new space (including furniture, rugs, toys, etc.) will make them much less curious when the baby is home and occupies the cute new room you’ve decorated. If possible, do not limit access.
- The Hospital: Have the new Dad bring home an article of clothing (shirt, blanket, etc.) with the baby’s scent on it. Remember, dogs can discriminate more than one scent so have something that smells like Mom/baby...and Dad/baby together.



Maintenance

- Introductions: You've already brought home the article of clothing with the baby's smell on it, so that part is done. When Mom arrives home, she should come inside alone and greet the pet(s) in a normal manner. Spend a few casual minutes with the pet(s) and remain calm. Then, Dad gets the honor of bringing in the new baby. Keep the experience positive, but do it slowly to avoid any surprises. Have one parent attending to the animal(s) and the other holding the baby.
- Stay Calm and Positive: Remember, your companion animal will take its cue from your behavior. Maintain a relaxed and confident demeanor and your pet will act accordingly. Speak in a normal and happy voice, and take care not to act anxious or overly protective.
- Your Pet Has Needs Too: Don't forget, your pet is used to a daily exercise routine, play time, and special attention. You can still go for a walk, just bring the baby along in the stroller (should be no problem if you've done obedience work with a leash). When you are feeding the baby, give the dog a job (chewing on a stuffed Kong, or holding a "down-stay" on a special rug) and they will feel like part of the "action". While you're changing the baby's diaper, talk to your dog or cat. The animal will feel like they're getting your attention, and the baby loves the sound of your voice – everyone wins! What you should avoid is the "one-on-one" time trap with your pet. If your pet only gets attention while the baby is napping, they will form a negative association with the baby.



Safety is important as well. By taking some basic steps you can facilitate a healthy relationship with all of your family members. For example, don't allow your dog to sleep under a cradle or bassinette as it could tip over. Don't leave your baby unattended on the floor or the pet may step on your little one. Supervision doesn't have to equal paranoia or high anxiety, but you must supervise at all times. Never leave the baby and animal alone in a room, even just to answer the phone. Animals are naturally curious and, like babies, can be unpredictable.

Most issues with safety will arise when the baby reaches the toddler stage. You've probably spent a lot of time childproofing your home...but you must also childproof your pet! Again, make sure your pet has obedience training. Stay away from competitive play (tug-o-war) as the dog may learn that they are "higher in the pack" than they really are. Get your pet accustomed to body handling (pulling, tugging, poking). Most toddlers have no fear, so it's up to you to watch for any clues that your dog or cat has had enough. Unfortunately, many people decide during this time to surrender their companion animal because they haven't taken necessary steps to make things work.

It is wonderful that you are thinking ahead about these issues. We hope that this information helps you to make your companion animal(s) part of a larger, loving family.