

Article 2 Dog trainer helps couples introduce family pets to newborns
By CATHERINE CREEGAN

Special to the Bulletin

There is no more joyous occasion for a couple than bringing a newborn baby home from the hospital. However, that occasion can sometimes, unfortunately, carry very real dangers if there is a pet dog waiting in the house.

Gus Marnel, a longtime resident of Milford and certified, licensed dog trainer, says a family dog improperly prepared for the "new arrival" can oftentimes turn hostile and even aggressive.

"It's unfortunately the reason why sometimes a dog ends up being taken out of the home permanently," says Marnel, owner of K-9 Communications.

He says employing key strategies when training a dog can help him easily accept a baby into the fold. In fact, he says dogs are often the first to know a woman is pregnant (even before the woman!) since their sense of smell is strong enough to detect even the slightest hormonal changes.

Marnel, who has been training canines for 30 years, recommends that before the baby is born both the father- and mother-to-be take extra time to familiarize the dog with the new changes about to take place.

"Let him into the nursery. Let him smell the new bassinet and other items in the room," said Marnel. "Don't be overly concerned with the room being immaculately clean . . . Yelling at him to get out of the room is only going to increase his curiosity and make him more tense."

He also said the mother-to-be should spend a lot of time with the dog before the birth, so the canine doesn't feel left out. Dogs can actually experience feelings of jealousy, he says, especially when a couple's lavish doses of love and affection switch from the trusted family dog to the new baby.

"I would also add that you should bring something home from the hospital with the baby's scent on it, like the baby blanket and let the dog smell it," he said. Why all this fuss and bother? Marnel says that dogs are descendants of wolves and are pack animals. Any dog properly integrated into a home knows his place in the "pack."

For example, with a married couple the dog has fully accepted that one human is the pack leader or what is known as the "alpha" wolf, the other human being in the house is second in charge, and the dog is completely comfortable being relegated to number three.

However, when a baby is introduced into the house, the dog expects to keep his No. 3 ranking, and treats the baby as a vulnerable puppy whom he can exploit and bully into a No. 4 status.

This tendency can be remedied, says Marnel, by greeting the dog at the front door of the house with the baby as soon as the couple gets home from the hospital. "Greet the dog with the baby as soon as you come home," says Marnel. "Let the dog sniff the baby from head to toe. Maybe the dog will lick the baby. That's okay, too."

Marnel says just these few simple steps will ensure a happy relationship between baby and dog.

"Children and dogs go together like peanut butter and jelly," he said. "If you follow these steps, you'll find the dog becomes the baby's best buddy and bodyguard."

Marnel says if you already have a baby or toddler in the house and are shopping for a dog, the best breeds for youngsters are Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers. "They are breeds that are good for kids because they have very low aggression," he says.

He advises staying away from high-strung Pomeranians, poodles and Chihuahuas, as well as Jack Russell terriers. He says the Jack Russell can sometimes be high-energy, demanding and a bit nippy. He says she also steers people away

from Rotweilers, Bull Mastiffs and Dobermans. Marnel said when a dog owner calls him he conducts a personal consultation, evaluation and then a period of training, which can take on average about three to four weeks. He teaches the standard sit, stay, come, heel and lie down – the five commands any dog should know backwards, he says. Knowing these commands will help keep dogs under control around children." A lot of dogs end up getting put to sleep after having bitten a child," he says. "That's a real problem with our society. We live in a disposable world where if a dog makes a mistake, you just get rid of it." Marnel says proper training could avoid many such tragedies. Consistency is the magic word with any dog, he says. He says an owner should expect the average puppy to live 15 to 16 years, which makes for a long-term relationship between owner and pet. "A dog is a phenomenal gift to give your family. You get all that unconditional love and moral support from a dog. Just ask anyone who owns a dog," he says. "It makes all the difference in the world to know your best friend is home waiting for you." Marnel says dogs are amazing creatures and there is actually a series of studies being conducted by scientists in which dogs are being used to discover cancer in humans via their astounding sense of smell.

BACK