

Introducing a New Baby to an Existing Pet

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The birth of a baby or adoption of a new child is associated with a great deal of anxiety, excitement, stress and change not only for the human members of the family, but also the family pet. Some dogs and cats can have a difficult time adjusting to a new child, but preparation and planning will help your pet cope with the changes.

How is my pet likely to respond to the new baby?

There are so many different variables that contribute to any pet's reaction to a new child that it is impossible to accurately predict the way that any pet will respond. However, there are some considerations that might give some insight into your pet's most likely reaction.

The first of these considerations is how much exposure to children your pet has previously had, and his reaction to those children. The most serious concern, of course, is if the pet has previously behaved aggressively or fearfully around children. If there have been previous problems, you should consult with a behaviorist to determine the situations that have previously led to aggression, and the safest way, if any, to make the transition. If the pet's previous problems were with a specific child, a specific age group or under specific circumstances, it may be possible to design a program so that the previous situations which resulted in aggression can be treated and resolved prior to the arrival of your new child.

The next most serious concern is the pet that has had little or no exposure to young children or babies. A lack of early socialization to children may lead to some initial anxiety or fear associated with the sights, sounds and odors of the new child. If there are no unpleasant experiences when the child first arrives, and the first few introductions are made positive, there may be no problems. Even if a pet has shown no previous problems when interacting with children, keeping all introductions positive will help to get the relationship between your pet and your new child off to a good start.

One final concern is your pet's behavior and temperament in general. Behavior issues that don't come into play with an infant may become more problematic with the growth and development of your child. Some pets that were ok with a child that was carried everywhere may have trouble adapting to the same child learning to crawl, walk, and play more interactively. Fear, dominance challenges, possessive displays, and even some rambunctious playful behaviors can result in aggression toward the child. Anxiety or fear can also lead to anorexia, compulsive disorders, or destructiveness (e.g. house-soiling, marking, chewing, digging).

What can we do to prepare for the arrival of our baby?

Behavior problems (destructiveness, house-soiling, compulsive disorders, increased demands for attention, generalized anxiety) may not develop directly from the arrival of the child, but rather from the changes in the household routine associated with the new arrival. With nine months or more to prepare for a baby's arrival, the best way to minimize problems and help the pet to cope is to make changes gradually so that they have been completed prior to the arrival of the child. Consider any changes that you may need to make in the pet's schedule, housing, play, exercise, or attention, so that adjustments can begin to be made well before the baby's arrival. Set up the nursery in advance and if the pet is to be kept out of the room, access should be denied before the child's arrival. If your intention is to allow your pet to continue to enter the room when supervised, begin to accompany your pet into the nursery so that it can adapt to the new odors and new setup. The dog should be allowed to investigate the baby's room, blankets, and new furniture, and praised or given a small food treat so that it can develop a positive association with each of these new cues.

For dogs, reviewing or upgrading obedience skills is essential so that you can safely and effectively control your dog in all situations. Obedience training should be reviewed every day, in a variety of locations and circumstances. Practice each command in different rooms of the home, in the yard, while out on walks, and when visitors come to the home. Concentrate on those commands that are presently the least successful, using prompts and rewards to achieve success and then gradually shaping the response so that the pet stays for progressively longer times, comes from greater distances and will heel and follow even when there are distractions. Any existing behavior problems should be resolved before the arrival of your baby.

Some pets might become anxious or fearful of any of the new and different stimuli associated with the sights, sounds, or odors of the new child. New activities associated with childcare can be practiced in front of pets so that they can become familiar with them. Tape recordings or videos of babies crying, holding a doll wrapped in a blanket, taking your dog for a walk beside a stroller or baby carriage, or even going through the motions of changing a diaper and applying baby powder will simulate some of the experiences to which your pet will soon be exposed. If there is any sign of anxiety associated with any of these situations, then more formal reward-based training should be practiced and repeated until the pet exhibits no problems in the presence of the stimuli. By providing a favored chew toy, giving a food reward, or providing extra affection during these activities, your pet may actually learn to enjoy these new stimuli.

Once your pet shows little or no fear or anxiety in these situations, you may want to enlist the help of some friends or relatives with young children. Dogs can be taken for a walk while the child is rolled in the stroller or carriage. A baby can be carried around the home or nursed in the presence of the dog and children should be encouraged to play at the opposite end of a room or yard from where the dog is situated. The dog must be well controlled, preferably with a leash and head halter, and given food rewards and/or play to keep the association positive. A Gentle Leader Head collar could also be worn to ensure additional safety, especially when being exposed to new situations. By the end of the visit it may even be possible to let the dog interact with the child but only if it remains friendly and shows no fear or anxiety.

For cats, the most important adaptation is to any changes that will be needed in the cat's home. Although fear and anxiety to the sights and sounds of a new baby are possible, adapting to changes in the household are often the most trying for cats. For example, obtaining new furniture, altering the cat's feeding, sleeping, elimination or play areas, and trying to keep the cat out of certain locations such as the crib, should all be considered before the arrival of the baby. To reduce the chances of the cat marking new furniture, the first few introductions to the new areas should be well supervised. Once your cat has investigated and rubbed against the new furniture, spraying is far less likely. Similarly, when the crib or cradle is first set up, the cat may wish to mark the area, or investigate, or even to sleep in the crib.

Remember, each of these techniques are intended to help the pet adapt to changes in the household or lifestyle before the arrival of the baby. Once the baby arrives, there will be far less time to deal with the needs of the pet, and there will be additional variables to which your pet will need to adapt. Even if your pet does begin to exhibit fear or anxiety, during this pre-arrival training, such anxiety will not be associated with the presence of the child. The cat will have no reason to develop animosity to the new child.

What should be done when the baby arrives?

Progress gradually, avoid any situations that might lead to fear, anxiety or discomfort in the baby's presence and make all associations and experiences in the baby's presence positive. Maintain or even increase the amount and type of training, exercise, and play.

Even a curious and affectionate pet may have some problems adjusting to the new arrival. Jumping up to greet when the baby is being carried, barking during the baby's sleep or nap times, raiding the diaper pail, licking the baby's face, or cuddling up to sleep against an infant who is still unable to shift position are just a

few of the concerns and potential problems that pet owners may need to deal with. Keep your pet's nails well trimmed. Supervise all interactions between the pet and baby. Keep the pet out of the baby's room during nap and sleeping times. Ensure that your dog is well controlled and responsive to obedience training commands. For some dogs, leaving a leash attached (preferably to a head collar) is a useful way to ensure additional control. (Make sure the dog is never unsupervised while wearing a leash or head collar.)

The most important aspect of retraining is to reward the pet for obedient and relaxed behavior in the presence of the child. In many households there will be less time and energy available for the pet. While focused on the child, or attending to the chores associated with parenthood, the pet may be ignored, disciplined for approaching too close, or confined to a different area of the home. Your pet may still receive its play, exercise, affection, food and attention, but often not until the baby is finally asleep or is under the care of some other family member. Many pets soon learn that the presence of the baby is a time for inattention, confinement, or even punishment, while the absence of the baby is a cue for "good things" to happen. This must be reversed. Every effort should be made to allow the pet into the room for food, play or affection when the baby is present. Feed the pet when the baby is being fed, or have another family member give affection to the pet, play with the pet, or do some reward training (tricks or other obedience training) when the child is in the room. Take your dog outdoors for play or a walk when you are taking the child out. The goal is to teach the pet that positives or "good things" are most likely to happen in the presence of the child.

What should be done if aggression arises?

Such behavior is very upsetting, regardless of its reasons. An immediate decision on whether to keep and work with the pet or remove it from the home must be made. Dogs targeting children may be motivated by fear, dominance, possessive, redirected, playful or predatory aggression. Such aggression may arise immediately when the child is brought into the home, or may begin as the child becomes more mobile or when the child grows a little older and begins to interact with the dog. Cat aggression toward children can be fear-induced, redirected, territorial, or play/predatory. For most aggression cases, especially those directed toward children, a behaviorist experienced in such issues would need to evaluate the situation, determine a prognosis and create an effective treatment program if it is safe to do so. Although some cases may be treated quickly and safely, most cases require extensive precautions to prevent injuries and a great deal of time, effort and commitment. Regardless of reason for aggression, biting dogs should be leashed (attached to the owner) preferably with a head collar and closely supervised or crated in the presence of small children. Aggressive cats should be confined away from small children except when they are in a carrier, on a leash and harness, or well supervised and either calm or otherwise occupied with food or toys.