

INFANTS, CHILDREN, AND DOGS

New or expectant parents typically have three major concerns: 1) How to prevent pet behavior problems from occurring after the baby arrives; 2) How to introduce the baby to the pet; and 3) How to keep the child safe around the family dog, as well as other animals. Pet owners often assume that jealousy is the cause of problem behaviors associated with the arrival of a new child into the home, but this is not the case. Most problems result from the anxiety caused by significant alterations in the pet's environment and the way the family interacts with the pet. Changes in feeding, exercise, and play schedules; changes in what the pet is allowed to do; changes in how the pet gets attention; and inconsistencies in the way family members interact with the pet can all lead to problems. Preparing the family dog for the new baby includes taking steps to ensure that the changes are gradual and not overwhelming for the pet, and reviewing obedience training and household rules so that the family has the control needed to direct the pet into desired behaviors.

Pets don't innately know how to behave around children, and children need guidance on how to interact with animals. Dogs are most likely to have social problems if they have had little contact or a previous unpleasant experience with babies or children, insufficient handling by humans, or inadequate training. Genetics also plays a role in the dog's sociability, predatory instincts, and temperament, which may have an impact on how the dog interacts with children.

Preparing puppies for children

Preparation for a good relationship between the pet and children begins when the dog is a puppy. To accomplish this, you need to provide frequent opportunities for the young pup to meet children during its early months of life. You should pick times when the pet and children are calm. Having treats available for children to offer to the pup will help the introductions go smoothly. These early interactions help prevent the development of fear, avoidance behavior, and aggression toward children when the pet is older.

Another concept the young pup needs to learn is that being touched can be pleasant and should not be feared. Family members should make a point of gently handling the pet and touching it in all the ways that a child might touch it. Frequently touching the tail, ears, and body, as well as gently tugging on the collar and brushing the hair will make the pet less likely to be upset when a child handles the pet later in life. Any type of physical punishment or threats with a hand should be avoided. If the pet associates hand movement with discomfort, it might bite when the child moves a hand toward it. All pets must learn that the human hand is friendly and not to be feared.

Some dogs show aggression when approached while they eat. This behavior can be avoided by teaching the young pup that it is good to have company when it eats. A family member should occasionally sit on the floor with the puppy while it eats. During this time, the pet can be gently touched all over. Pieces of kibble should be picked from the bowl and hand fed to the pup. The bowl should periodically be picked up for a second and placed back on the floor. If the family member occasionally slips a chunk of canned food into the bowl while the pet is eating its dry food, it will look forward to having humans nearby at dinner time. By doing these exercises, the pup will learn that there is no risk that humans will steal its food, but the meal actually improves when humans are nearby.

Preparing the adult dog for the new baby

The first thing to consider is the pet's temperament. Does your dog growl or snap when touched, disturbed while eating, playing with toys, or resting? If your pet exhibits any type of aggression toward people or animals, seek help from your veterinarian or a qualified pet behavior consultant as soon as possible. Even dogs that get along quite well with children, but exhibit other forms of aggression (such as territorial aggression), can be dangerous for the child that inadvertently gets near the pet when it is aggressive or aroused.

As soon as the mother learns of her pregnancy, some thought should be given to preparing the pet for the inevitable changes that occur when a new baby arrives. Begin by reviewing the dog's obedience training. It is very important to have the pet under reliable verbal control. An unruly, active dog can be as much of a threat to the baby as an aggressive dog. If the pet will readily respond to 'sit,' 'down,' 'stay,' and 'settle,' you will have tools with which to increase desirable behavior and decrease undesirable behavior.

Next, you need to think about the pet's daily schedule, as well as the type and amount of interactions with family members the dog is currently used to getting. Once the baby arrives, this may be dramatically changed. The goal is to make the changes gradual and less noticeable to the pet. Decide on feeding, exercise, and play schedules that can be maintained while providing for the demanding needs of a newborn. Gradually adjust your present schedules until you arrive at ones that will best fit the family's situation once the baby is home. Consideration should also be given to the amount of attention that is given to the dog and how it is given. Tending to the baby's needs is very time consuming and will no doubt reduce the amount of physical attention that can be given to the dog. The amount should be gradually decreased until you arrive at an amount that can be maintained. How the attention is given is also very important. If your pet is used to getting attention whenever he nudges or licks, he will be very confused when he suddenly cannot get what he wants on demand. A good way to handle this is to ignore pushy behaviors and give attention only when the pet is leaving you alone or as a reward for responding to one of your commands ('sit,' 'down'). Other things that will need to be worked on are those behaviors that are permitted now, but won't be permitted when the baby is at home. Jumping up on family members, lying on furniture, climbing onto your lap, or excessive barking are behaviors that often must be changed.

The dog should also be prepared in advance to accept and enjoy the new noises and smells associated with a new baby. If the dog gets upset when it hears strange sounds, a recording can be made of baby noises (cooing, crying, screaming, etc.). Play the recording for the dog so it can barely be heard, and slowly increase the volume until an anxious response is obtained. Then, reduce the volume just below this level and play the tape while jovially requesting obedience commands for tasty food treats. Do at least seven, 15-minute sessions each week. Very gradually increase the volume as the weeks go by until the pet seems comfortable with these noises at high volumes. To prepare the pet for the new smells that will arrive with the baby, take something home from the hospital, such as a towel or blanket with the baby's scent. Ask the dog to sit, then present the object to the pet. While the dog is sniffing, say the baby's name in an upbeat tone and give it lots of praise. On occasion, some dogs will become anxious when the owner carries or nurses the baby. Testing the dog by carrying around and fussing with a doll (especially one that actually moves and makes crying sounds) can be useful. If there is any anxiety, a positive association should be made with this doll using favored food rewards, affection, or a favored play toy (see handouts on desensitization and counterconditioning).

When the baby comes home

Since the pet hasn't seen his mistress for several days, he will probably be very excited and may want to jump up. Therefore, if someone else carries the baby into the home, the mother can greet the dog without worrying that he might accidentally injure the baby. By taking this approach, you avoid scoldings and anxious feelings being associated with the presence of the baby.

Wait until the excitement has died down, the pet is calm, and you are available to supervise before introducing the dog to the baby. That may be later in the same day or could be several weeks afterward. Careful judgment must be exercised in deciding when to allow the dog close enough to sniff. If there is a chance the dog might jump, use a leash, which can be attached to a head halter for even greater control. If there is **any** likelihood that the dog might bite, consider using a basket wire or plastic muzzle. **NEVER** (no matter how sweet, trustworthy, or friendly the pet appears) allow an unsupervised dog around the baby. You should be especially vigilant when the baby is crying, kicking, or waving its arms. This could cause a curious dog to jump up and scratch or otherwise injure the infant. During these times, it is wise to either put the pet in a 'down-stay' away from the baby, put it in another room with a very special chew toy, or confine it to the yard. If the pet exhibits any predatory behavior (stalking, strong focus, odd whining, unusual interest) around the baby, take extra precautions and contact your veterinarian or a qualified behavior consultant for advice.

Whenever the dog is in the room with the baby, the family should act very happy and praise all acceptable behaviors (e.g., not jumping, being calm, responding to commands, being relaxed when the baby cries, etc.). The idea is to promote desirable behaviors and to make the dog look forward to the baby's presence because it is associated with a lot of good positive attention. This association can be made more dramatic by reducing the amount of attention or treats the dog gets when the baby is not around. In this way, the dog learns that the presence of the baby is associated with positive events. Similarly avoid punishment or banishing the dog from the room when the baby is present so that a negative association does not develop. The biggest mistake owners make when they try to shape their dog's behavior is to concentrate on telling the dog what is wrong, while neglecting to tell it what is right. A good exercise to bring about the association of good feelings for the baby is for one parent to sit in a room and hold the baby, while the other stands at the opposite end of the room and asks the pet to respond to commands for tasty food treats. Commands should be given in a very happy tone and lots of praise should accompany the food treats. Gradually move the exercises closer and closer to the baby.

Children and dogs

As the baby continues to grow and mature, the dog will be exposed to a variety of new stimuli from crawling to toddling to walking and having things taken away. Even if the dog has adapted nicely to a particular stage in the child's life, owners must always be prepared for a change in the relationship between the child and pet.

Interactions between pups and young children should always be supervised. The spontaneous, active behavior of children is exciting for most dogs, and easily elicits rough play from them. Encouraging the child to give tasty food rewards to the pet for responding to 'sit' commands is a simple way to teach the pup to keep its paws on the ground and expect good things whenever it is around children.

Another important thing to remember is to avoid doing anything to the dog that you don't want your child to do. This includes physical punishment, teasing, and rough play. Set a good example. Children don't innately know how to interact with animals, so they must be taught. You need to teach your child how to play with the pet. For example, fetch is a great game for the child and dog to share with each other. You must also teach the child how to touch the pet. While some dogs will tolerate any type of normal physical contact, the child will be safer if taught to avoid making contact around the eyes, ears, and head, and to pat the dog along its side. Hugging and getting face-to-face are not well tolerated by some dogs and are also best avoided. If the dog is small, you will need to teach the child when and how to comfortably pick it up.

Children should have some control over the pet and this can begin at a relatively early age. Once the child is talking, a family member can hold the child in the lap and teach the pet to sit when the child gives a command. This can be done by coaching the child to say the command word at the same time as the adult. Gradually, the adult can begin whispering the word so the child gives the command alone. This can be repeated with other commands. When the child is old enough, it can request deference from the dog before giving it things that it wants (toys, treats, play) by asking it to respond to a command first. Non-aggressive pets can be taught to look forward to having the child present while they eat by doing a safe, easy exercise. Simply carry the child over to the pet while it eats and hold it a safe distance above the pet. As the pet eats, the child can drop small pieces of meat into the bowl or on the floor next to the bowl.

Children must also learn some rules about other pets. The most important rule is that the child must NEVER pet another family's pet or give it food unless an adult gives permission. Dogs on a leash, by food, by toys, sleeping, acting sick, tied down, or running loose should never be approached. All family members must also follow these rules for them to work. Remember, children are imitators. You must also teach children about avoiding a pet that is exhibiting potentially dangerous behavior. Aggressive behavior is fairly obvious to most children, but few children know that fearful animals should also be avoided. Discuss aggressive postures (growling, loud barking, hair standing on end) and fearful behaviors (trembling, crouching, ears down, tail tucked) and teach the child to avoid animals exhibiting those behaviors. If the child is approached by a dog that is acting aggressive, s/he should stand very still like a tree, say nothing, hold the arms against the body, and avoid eye contact with the dog. If the child is on the ground or knocked down, he should curl into a tight ball, cover the ears with his fists, and remain still and quiet until the animal moves far away. As you might imagine, the necessary responses are contrary to what most children will do when threatened, so it is very important that you actually spend time practicing with them. You should also instruct your children about what to do if a bite occurs. They should try to remember where the bite occurred, what the dog looked like, where it went following the bite, and to report the bite to an adult immediately.

Health concerns

It is rare for a dog to spread disease to humans, but it can occur. The number one health risk is from aggression, so that bite prevention and safety is the overriding concern. With some simple rules most other health problems can be prevented.

1. Have your pet examined and vaccinated at least once a year, and ensure that it is free of parasites.
2. Have a stool sample checked for parasites once or twice a year, and clean all stools from the yard immediately. Ensure that all family members wash hands after cleaning the yard, playing in the yard, or playing with the dog.
3. Have your pet examined immediately if there are any skin conditions or gastrointestinal conditions, as there are fungal infections (ringworm) and parasites (mites, fleas) and some intestinal bacteria that can be contagious to people. Similarly if there are skin conditions or gastrointestinal conditions among family members, have the pet checked.
4. It is also advisable to avoid allowing the dog to lick the face of children (especially around the mouth or eyes) and to teach the children to wash thoroughly after playing sessions with the dog.
5. Any bite or scratch should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected and wounds that break the skin or appear to become infected should be reported to a medical authority.

Summary

1. Prepare puppies during the early months of life with a variety of people, including young children.
2. Anticipate problems and work on their prevention well before the baby arrives home.
3. ALWAYS supervise pet/child interactions. Prevent access to the child when a responsible adult is not available to supervise.
4. Don't take the relationship between the pet and the baby for granted. Actively take steps to shape it in a positive way.
5. Avoid punishing the pet, banishing it from the room, or ignoring the pet when the child is present.
6. Teach children how to act around their pets, around other animals, and what to do if threatened.