

Introducing the family dog to the new baby

Congratulations on your new baby! When most pet owners learn that they are expecting, they begin to wonder how their pets will react to the new baby and how to introduce them to each other. Introducing your dog to the new arrival is an important process and should be started well before the baby is born and arrives home. When working through the training process, remember that no matter how well you know your pet, accidents do happen and a baby should never be left alone with a pet under any circumstances. The process outlined below will help you as you begin the introduction process and your life with the new addition.

Most dogs learn quickly to adapt to a new baby in the home. However, extra precautions should be taken if your pet has ever shown aggression to adults or other babies and toddlers. Great care should also be taken if your pet has ever demonstrated predatory behaviors in the past. Predatory behaviors are such things as stalking, catching and/or killing small animals, such as birds, squirrels, mice, cats, other dogs etc. If your dog has ever demonstrated these aggressive behaviors, it is best to err on the side of caution and consult with a behavioral specialist. This specialist will be able to work with you one on one to develop acceptable behaviors in your pet and ensure the safety of your new baby.

The introduction process and essential steps should begin well before the baby arrives home from the hospital. Most non-aggressive dogs will view your new infant with great curiosity and after an initial period of exploration will adapt easily to the changes in your household. However, in any new situation it is essential that your pet know, understand and quickly obey certain obedience commands.

The two most essential commands for this introduction are sit and stay. These two commands may initially be encouraged with food rewards and should be practiced frequently. However, as these commands will soon be associated with the new baby, they should not be used as punishment or taught in a harsh manner. Instead, treat the learning process as a game and work to make it an enjoyable experience for your pet, as this process will soon be associated with the new baby.

Once the basic commands of sit and stay have been successfully mastered, begin teaching your pet to remain in the sit and stay positions as you move away from him. Once your pet will hold the sit and stay commands as you walk and turn away, begin adding in some elements that the animal will experience once the baby is home. For example, while holding a baby doll, give the sit/stay command and then proceed to feed, burp or diaper the baby. This will acclimatise your pet to many of the new behaviours that will occur around the house and will soon be associated with the positive reinforcement of the sit/stay games. Be sure to reward your pet with praise, attention and food rewards during each step of this process, as the hopefully positive experience will soon be associated with your new baby.

Once the baby is born, but before it is brought home, bring home some of the baby's personal items, such as a blanket or outfit. These items may initially be given to the pet to sniff and lick in order to become familiar with the baby's scent. After this period, take the items and practice the sit/stay game by giving the sit/stay command and then performing common actions while holding the scent items. Also practice having the animal sit/stay while you are standing close to them with the scent items, this allows them to practice proper behavior with the new scent close by.

Your pet should be introduced to the new baby in a calm, quiet and controlled environment. Unfortunately, this is not usually the description of a family just arriving home from the hospital. Therefore, the best time to introduce your pet to the baby is after the initial

excitement period. Do allow your dog to greet the mother upon arrival and get used to the babies scent on her skin and clothing.

When the initial excitement has calmed, the introduction can take place. Depending on your pet, one person should either sit or stand while holding the baby. A second person should hold the leashed dog and give the sit/stay command. The dog should be allowed to slowly move closer to the baby as long as it obeys the sit/stay commands and is not unduly aroused by the baby's cries, movements or scent. If your pet becomes agitated, then stop the exercise and begin again after the animal calms down. Once the animal is acclimated to the baby's noises then, depending on your comfort level, allow the animal to sniff the baby, but do not allow him to get close enough to bite. After the animal is calm and obedient on the leash, then the same exercises should be practiced with the dog off the leash. Your initial introductions may take anywhere from an hour to a few days, depending on the comfort level and calmness of your pet. Once you are confident in your pet's ability to remain calm around the new baby, allow him to wander supervised around the house. Be sure to watch his reactions and interest level in the baby, as you make this acceptance period a fun experience for everyone involved.

As a responsible pet owner, it is essential to remember that no matter what amount of introduction or socialization has occurred, an infant should never be left unsupervised at any time with a family pet. Unfortunately, accidents and aggression do happen. If you are at all concerned with your pet's reaction to a new addition consult a behavioral specialist.