

*Peer Reviewed*

## And Baby Makes **Two**

In many families the pet is the “first” baby until a child comes along. How can I help owners transition their dog to a new family dynamic?

The ideal situation is to begin when the pet is a puppy or kitten (the advice in this column is most applicable to puppies and dogs with some information that addresses kittens and cats). If children are not present in the home, it is useful to have the new pet spend regular, supervised, gentle, pleasant interactions with children both in and out of the home setting, which helps set a foundation for living with children at a later time. Admittedly this scenario may not be possible, so other steps may need to be taken before the newborn arrives.

The best way to help the pet cope is to plan well ahead so that the owner can gradually make changes (eg, schedule changes; access to the house; changes in play, exercise, or attention) before bringing the new baby home. Help the family design a daily routine of social and alone times that meet all of the pet’s needs for physical activity, social contact and object play, chew toys, and rest.

Try to think of situations that may cause problems, such as barking, excitement with visitors, or jumping up on people, so they can be addressed well ahead of time. The use of a leash, Gentle Leader Head Collar (Premier, gentleleader.com), or body harness may facilitate training to commands in dogs.

CONTINUES



## As Baby Grows Up

Teach toddlers and older children how to interact appropriately with the real pet by demonstrating proper behavior on a stuffed dog or cat. Use a picture of a dog lying down in a corner or up against a wall and teach "Do not play with this dog." Show the child a picture of a dog standing on all 4 feet and relaxed in an open area and teach "OK to play with."

An excellent guide and CD for parents and children is *The Blue Dog*, available through the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) at [avma.org/bluedog/default.asp](http://avma.org/bluedog/default.asp).



It is important to keep in mind that the most common reason for human-directed aggression is fear. This is especially true when children become mobile and are able to crawl and walk. The dog must have room to move without feeling cornered or trapped. In some situations, interactions work better if they are initiated by the dog rather than the toddler, but constant supervision is always necessary to prevent problems. Most bites involving children occur when the pet is resting or eating, so these situations must be carefully monitored.<sup>1</sup>

### BEFORE THE BABY COMES HOME

- **Review training:** Go over commands such as sit, down, and stay. Familiarize the dog so it is comfortable being confined in a safe, secure location where toys, resting area, water bowl, food, and litter box (for a cat) are available. The dog or cat should be trained to accept confinement before the baby arrives so that it can be relaxed and calm away from family if needed after the baby comes home.
- **Prepare early:** Set up the nursery in advance and decide if the pet will have access to the room. If not, then the pet should calmly but consistently be denied access and rewarded for compliance prior to the child's arrival. If access will be allowed, begin to accompany the pet into the nursery so that it can adapt to the new odors and furniture. Allow investigation of the room, blankets, and new furniture and reward with praise, food, play, or petting for calm behavior.
- **Rehearse:** Pets might become anxious or fearful of new and different stimuli associated with the sights, sounds, or odors of a new child. Practice activities associated with child-care in front of the pet to make these routines seem familiar. Holding a doll wrapped in a blanket, setting up baby furniture, playing recordings of a baby crying, or going through the motions of changing a diaper will simulate some of the experiences to which the pet will soon be exposed. If the pet shows signs of anxiety with any of these situations, begin reward-based training until the pet exhibits no problems in the presence of the stimuli.
- **Train pets to be aware of children's behavior:** It is useful to have the pet become familiar

and comfortable with having its hair/ears pulled by initially doing it very gently and rewarding good behavior with a treat/affection. Gradually increase the intensity of the pulling until you mimic what a toddler may do. Also teach a “go to your place” command so you can send the pet away from unwanted interactions.

### AFTER THE BABY COMES HOME

- **Introductions:** Have a family member or friend bring home some clothing that the baby has worn in the hospital for the pet to smell so it can become accustomed to the new odors. When the baby first arrives home, try to have another person hold the baby so the owners can greet the pet. Introductions should not begin until everything has calmed down. In multipet households, introduce each pet one at a time to the new baby and make sure the pet remains controlled during the introduction. For dogs, leashes and head halters or harnesses can be helpful. One person should be instructed to hold the baby while sitting comfortably on a chair. Another person should be carefully monitoring the pet’s behavior.
- **Handle aggression early:** The pet should be gently but immediately interrupted at any sign of aggressive or unacceptable nonaggressive behavior (eg, crawling on top of the baby). Aggressive behavior should result in immediate isolation of the pet and possibly referral to a board-certified behaviorist. The owners should not assume things will get better without proper intervention. Unacceptable, nonaggressive behavior should result in redirection of the pet to an alternative desirable behavior (eg, sit) that is rewarded. Naturally, *none of this is a substitute for constant supervision and separation of the pet and child when necessary.*
- **Take the pet’s point of view:** When parents are focused on the child or the chores associated with parenthood, pets may be ignored, disciplined for approaching too close, or confined to a different area of the home, all of which may create anxiety. Often a pet may receive its play, exercise, affection, food, and attention, but not until the baby is asleep. This may inadvertently teach the pet that the baby is something negative (baby = no attention).

Therefore, owners should make a point of paying attention to pets when the baby is active and present. This can be done with verbal engagement; or if two adults are present, one adult can attend to the baby and the other adult can pet or play with the pet(s) or schedule walks together. When the baby is sleeping, try to pay less attention to the pets.

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

For particularly anxious dogs or cats, consider placing a DAP (dog-appeasing pheromone, CEVA, [dap-pheromone.com](http://dap-pheromone.com)) or Feliway (cat-calming pheromone, CEVA, [feliway.com](http://feliway.com)) diffuser in the house about 2 weeks before the baby’s arrival.

If only one parent or other adult is at home during the first few weeks, pets should be restrained or confined in the presence of the infant. Tethers, crates, or baby gates may be helpful. Good sense requires that pets are never left alone with a baby or child; however, with advance planning, training, and attention, most pets adjust well to their expanding family.

See, Aids & Resources, back page, for references and suggested reading.

### Tx at a Glance

- Think ahead to anticipate changes.
- Teach new tasks that will be useful when the baby arrives:
  - ▶ Good responses to sit, down, stay
  - ▶ Go to an assigned place
  - ▶ Settle and relax
  - ▶ Accept confinement
- Allow the pet to become familiar with new furniture, toys and smells.
- Introduce pets when it is calm, use supervision and control devices.