

Facilitating Family Dog and Cats' Adjustments to Baby

In California, there is approximately one dog for every child. It is unlikely that animals will innately know how to respond to a child. Thus, conditioning pets prior to the arrival of an infant, and to other changes in the home environment, is key. Many pet owners mistake anxiety and stress in their pets for jealousy. Here are some guidelines to work towards preparing your pet before and after the baby's arrival:

Examine your pet's behaviors:

Does your pet have any potentially aggressive or dangerous behaviors? Are any of your friends or family worried about the behavior of your pet?

Some examples of behaviors are: mouthing/nipping/snapping/biting, growling/hissing, jumping, stalking/chasing, pawing/swatting/clawing, posturing/focusing (as with a toy); history of chasing and biting small animals, wheels, dolls/inanimate objects. If you have noticed these behaviors, when do they occur? At the food dish, when stressed (such as startled, prodded, or tail pulled), during play, or at rest?

When preparing for baby's arrival, visit the veterinarian with your pet. Make sure that your pet is current on vaccinations and parasite control (both internal and external parasites). Before your appointment, keep a journal for several days of your pet's behavior so that you can more easily mention concerns or observations during your visit.

Before baby's arrival:

Obedience training for basic commands is useful in helping pets adjust to changes in their environments. For most training, your pet should show the desired response before receiving **positive reinforcement**, such as play, petting, open doors, invitations onto furniture, food, or treats. This can also be done when the pet explores the baby's new room. Children often like to play with pets' food—if your pet shows any food bowl aggression, work on gradually approaching bowl while offering treats. For animals that have been trained previously but are out of practice, review the old training and commands!

Ignore pushy or attention-seeking behaviors, such as nudging, stealing, pawing, or barking. Once the pet stops, reward it with positive reinforcement, as mentioned above.

Though it sounds difficult, experts recommend that before the baby arrives, you should gradually reduce the amount of time you spend with your pet. So that pets become used to the social order in the household, it is best to refrain from letting your pets sleep in your bed, or even in your bedroom.

You may want to control your pet's access to the baby's room and other living areas (as well as the car), perhaps by installing a screen door or baby gate so that the pet can see into the room but not enter. Although we want our pets and children to be friends, **DO NOT LEAVE YOUR PET ALONE WITH A CHILD** until the child can handle the pet and its reactions appropriately.

Consider moving a cat's litterbox and food to less trafficked areas before the baby arrives to reduce chances of stress or inappropriate soiling. Pregnant women should avoid contact with

litterboxes (Toxoplasmosis). Accustom your pet to likely changes in your schedule, such as new walking/feeding times.

Accustom the pet to new/baby noises. Play the CD or tape of these noises at a level where the pet is not displaying behaviors of stress while playing with pet and/or providing treats. Perform similar desensitization with electronic beeping toys and swings.

For several weeks before the baby's arrival, walk your dog with an empty stroller to allow for adjustment to stroller noises and motion without inciting anxiety, barking, or leash pulling. If you plan on using a different leash, such as a Gentle Leader, begin early so that your dog has time to get used to it.

Bringing baby home:

Bring a blanket or other item associated with the new baby home for the pets to smell while the baby is still at the hospital or away from the home. The parents should enter the home to greet the pets before another person (or at least the parent that is least attached to the dog) enters carrying the baby. Once the pet has relaxed, you may introduce your pet to the baby. Have one person monitor/supervise the pet while another holds and watches the baby. A leash is necessary for dogs, as well as potentially a muzzle for better control during the first several interactions. If you observe ANY unusual or unwanted behavior, calmly walk the pet away from the baby, change tasks, play, or give a treat to the pet once it relaxes. This way, the pet associates fun or positive activities with the baby's presence. If your dog or cat appears to have any focusing/predatory posturing behavior towards the baby, keep your pet away from the baby until further assessment by your veterinarian.

In general, when pets are in the room with the baby, the family should act happy and positive towards the pets to reduce tension and perhaps compensate for a decrease in interactions during other times.

Using **positive punishment** (addition of adverse stimuli, such as yelling, hitting, etc.) with your pet for inappropriate behaviors may contribute to a pet's negative associations with the baby. If inappropriate behaviors occur, don't use positive punishment with your pet. You may instead choose to ignore the pet or to move away from the baby, change tasks, and provide positive feedback for other, more desired, behaviors.

Please contact your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns about the behavior and health of your pet, and your physician regarding your or your baby's health.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:
Brandon Wilson, Lina Yetishefsky, Amalia Zacher*



Clinical Animal Behavior Service

www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/small_animal/behavior