

Pets and a New Baby

By Sherry Woodard

What can I do to prepare my pets for the new baby?

Getting ready for a new family member is a busy, exciting time. In addition to all that you need to do to prepare for the new baby, there are a few things you can do to make the transition easier for your pets. Most pets accept a new baby with no problem. But, if you want to be extra careful, you can begin to prepare them ahead of time for the big event.

First, make sure your pets are up-to-date with veterinary checkups and vaccinations, since you may not have time for such things in the first few months after the baby's birth. Give your pets plenty of special attention. Play with your cats and dogs on a regular basis; exercise helps them to relax, and it relieves stress for the whole family.



If you have a dog, consider taking him or her in for a training refresher course. Find a trainer who uses positive reinforcement. A trainer who has experience with babies and children is ideal, since he or she can design a training, exercise, and safety plan for your family. It will save you a lot of time and frustration when you are busy with the baby if your dog knows key commands, such as “drop it,” “leave it,” “wait,” and “down/stay.” Make sure you practice the commands daily with your dog.

Both cats and dogs can benefit from familiarity with babies before you bring your new one home. Invite friends over who have babies and small children. Watch your animals closely to see how they react. If your pets seem unduly frightened, you might want to seek help from a behaviorist; your veterinarian may be able to refer you to someone. Never, ever leave a baby or child unsupervised with the animals.

Start using baby products such as lotion, bath soap, powder, and laundry soap. If you and the rest of the family smell like baby products, the baby will have a familiar smell when he or she arrives.

Set up the baby's room as soon as possible, so your animals will accept the new arrangement long before the baby comes home. A screen door can be very helpful to keep cats and dogs away from the sleeping baby. You can practice going into the room and reading aloud or talking in tones you will use with the baby. The animals will learn to wait (probably at the door) for your return.

How should I introduce the baby on the big day?

Mom should greet the animals while another person holds the baby, since a normal greeting from mom will help the animals feel that everything is okay. Mom can then hold out one of the baby's blankets for the animals to smell. Your dog should be held on a loose lead.

When you enter the house, stay standing until the animals have had a chance to smell and listen to the baby. Ask your dog to sit or lay down before the person holding the baby sits down. Watch the animals closely. If your dog is curious, allow him to view the baby from about six feet away. Hold the lead loose, but short enough so that the dog can't reach the baby. Reward the dog with praise if he shows no fear or aggression. If your dog has been fine with other babies, you can allow him to go closer, but use caution.

What do I need to be aware of as we start life with a baby?

Your animals may need reassurance that life hasn't changed all that much, so make sure you continue to give them special attention. Watch for signs of stress. Your dog may bark more; chase her tail, circle or pace; eliminate inappropriately; sulk or look depressed; start licking herself or chewing on herself incessantly; lose her appetite; or have diarrhea.

Your cat may hide or seem shy; become grumpy, smacking people and other animals; eliminate inappropriately; sulk or look depressed; groom excessively, to the point of making bald spots or sores; lose his appetite; or have diarrhea. Any change in behavior can be a warning that your animal may need help adjusting. Consult with your veterinarian if you notice changes in your pet's behavior.

When you start using a high chair to feed the baby, your cat or dog may try to share meals with the baby. Teach the animals that when the baby is eating, they don't get any tidbits. They will soon stop begging.

Never give your dog a doll that looks like a real baby to play with. Young dogs that play rough need to practice being calm and gentle. You can help by giving your puppy a massage; sit on the floor with her and slowly rub her all over until she is so relaxed that she falls asleep. Try to restrict vigorous play to places the baby will not be crawling around in later (outside or in the garage).

If you need to leave your baby with a sitter, tell the sitter to keep the animals and the baby apart in your absence. Don't take unnecessary risks with any of your family members – human or otherwise.

There will be new challenges when the baby starts to crawl and then walk. You will soon have a very short person walking around the house with toys and food that may be very tempting (and accessible) to a dog. Once you have a toddler, it's even more important to practice your dog's commands every day. Your pets can sometimes be a big help – if your child isn't ready to calm down for a nap, try reading out loud to your dog or cat to create the appropriate restful atmosphere.

Even if your animals are extremely tolerant, children need to be taught to be gentle with animals, since eventually they will be around someone else's pets who may not be so tolerant. Teaching kindness and respect for animals will bring greater benefit than simply avoiding getting bitten or scratched – it builds a better world for all of us.

Remember, never leave a baby or child unattended around animals.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Preventing Dog Bites on Children