

Pets Meet Baby

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People have called their veterinarian because their dog is acting “weird,” sniffing around their tummy. It turns out what they needed wasn't a veterinarian but a pregnancy test. In fact, their best friend with four legs turned out to be the test.

Today, lots of families expecting their first baby already consider their pet their “baby.” In fact, for over 20% of the families having a first baby, the dog or cat came first. They tell themselves, Fido or Fluffy will get the same attention as always. But of course, that rarely realistically happens. Having a baby is life changing, and similarly so is having a second or third child. The relationship with the pet changes, the household changes, and pets don't always respond well to change.

Another problem is that people forget their pet is – after all, a pet. No matter how wonderful a pet is with children adult supervision is *always* required. Most instances of injuries to the kids or pets occur as a result of no supervision.

Preparing for the new addition ideally begins before there's any announcement, months or even years before is actually ideal⁵.

It's all about thinking and planning ahead

Ideally, it's best to get the pet acclimated to babies well before the stork arrives. Ask friends, relatives to visit your house with their newborns and rambunctious two-year olds (dogs should be on-leash).

When the baby fusses, toss some kibble or treats into the air. The trick is to make it seem as if the baby is presenting the yummys. The goal is for pets who get agitated by the sound of crying baby to now associate that fussing with something enjoyable.

In some cases, even the best treats won't convince a pet that a wailing baby isn't terrifying. That's not as bad as it sounds. What's bad is to learn this when the baby is actually home. Knowing in advance of the real arrival allows for the time to readjust the pet's attitude with desensitization and counter-conditioning.

Instruct clients to download the sound of a crying child from the Internet. Play it back the sound of the bawling baby at a very, very soft level below the threshold that affects the pet as the pet enjoys dinner several rooms away. Ever so gradually pump up the volume, and move the food dish closer to the speakers so eventually the pet associates the crying with dinner.

Also, tell your clients to become their favorite actor. Ask them to periodically speak baby talk to a doll. This conditions pets to your “baby tone” as well as the attention going elsewhere.

As for a visiting toddler, it's imperative the visit be fun. Don't force your pet to interact (in fact, it's best they meet outside). Caution is normal if your pet has not been previously exposed to “little people.” However, if your pet is fearful, it may take several visits to warm up.

If your pet offers even a hint of aggression, the good news is that now is the time to nip the problem in the bud – before baby comes home. Call in professional help. Mostly when pets aggress to people – young children, in particular, they're fearful.

It helps is to have control of the pet when the baby arrives; review basic dog training. It's also helpful to teach dogs and cats to go to an assigned quiet place, such as bed.

Getting ready

Some suggest keeping pets out of the baby's nursery (even as you are preparing for the baby's arrival). This only serves to enhance the pet's anxiety or curiosity, and potentially creates a problem where there was none.

You don't want to deal with treating an obstruction (or grossed out clients), so tell them to create a dog-proof place to store dirty diapers (a favorite snack for some not so discriminating dogs). Don't wait until the baby arrives to relocate the dog's favorite bed or the cat's litter box.

These days, having a baby seems to happen quicker than the drive through at a fast food restaurant. If there's an opportunity, bringing in the baby's blanket home hours or days the actual baby is an introduction nearly as effective as face to paw.

Pheromone products, such as D.A.P. and Feliway (Ceva Animal Health), can soothe tense nerves. Also, consider Anxitane (Chewable tablets containing L-Theanine or Suntheanine®, an amino acid indicated for use in cats and dogs to help keep them calm and relaxed, Vrbac)

Old wives tails

Be pre-emptive, explain why giving up cats for fears of toxoplasmosis is unwarranted, and if a medical professional has questions – contact you. Toxoplasmosis concerns are real, but when clients understand how it's transmitted, and offered common sense precautions, they are unlikely want to give up their cat(s).

Cats do not suffocate babies: They may want to lick messy faces, though.

Domestic ferrets do not hunt down and injure infants: Ferrets, like all pets, should never be left alone with newborns or young children.

Home sweet home

Once the baby's odor is awash in a blanket, don't wash it. Place it 10-feet from the pet's food dish, and gradually inch it closer over the next 48-hours. As the pet enjoys a delicious meal, the association will be made with the baby's smell.

Parasite control is always important, but even more of an issue with infants and young children.

No one knows for sure if pets actually get jealous – but they may learn to resent the attention the baby is receiving. Suggest clients maintain as much of the pet's usual routine as possible. So, if Fluffy was typically brushed or Fido was taken for a walk at 7 p.m. – attempt to continue the routines. You might have to adjust the times, but create a new normal routine. Pets thrive on structure and consistency.

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