

Managing Dogs and Babies

BEFORE YOUR BABY COMES

The time before your baby arrives is your opportunity to introduce your pet to the physical changes that will occur in your home environment that will be associated with the baby. It's also the time to try to establish a time your pet can expect to spend some time with you so that you can give him a little special attention each day.

- You will not want the pet to be in the baby's room without supervision, so please accustom him to gates or a closed door to that room. Even if the room is not finished yet, it's good to start now, especially if this is a room the pet used to be allowed to enter.
- If you anticipate gating your pet out of other areas of the house so that you can tend to and play with the baby without having to supervise the pet, please start putting those gates up now. The web sites on our Reading List handout are a good source for different styles and sizes of gates.
- Exercise pens (X-pens) can sometimes be helpful confining a dog away from a baby while still in the same room with you. The web sites above will have listings of these as well. These are used as portable "safe zones" for dogs, and dogs should have appealing toys, possibly food-based, when confined there. If you plan to use one, you might try it now while you are working around the house to see if the dog is distressed by it. If so, please let us know.
- If you will want to walk your dog and the baby at the same time, please work with him now on leash walking, so that by the time the baby comes he will be good at walking without pulling.
- If your dog is aggressive to people or animals on walks, it's best not to consider walking baby and dog at the same time.
- Any baby furniture, including swings, cribs, bassinets, etc. that you will be using can be introduced now so that it will not be part of the changes that happen just when the baby arrives.
- If you plan to use a baby sling to carry the baby, wear it frequently now. You can put a doll in it to help acquaint the pet with your "new look". If the pet seems concerned about this please let us know.
- It may be helpful to get a CD of baby sounds such as crying and gurgling and play it frequently so that these sounds are not new to the pet when the baby arrives.
- If you have friends or relatives whose babies visit you, please note and let us know about your pet's reactions to them. We don't want the pet to have contact with them, merely to know whether he seems to consider them routine or seems anxious or upset by them.

Behavior Medicine

- It is not usually possible to determine before a baby arrives what will be her sleeping/waking/fussy periods of the day. However, you might choose a time when there would generally be more than one adult at home and begin spending 15-30 minutes with your pet now at that time of day. Even if you can't always give your pet attention at this time, it may be helpful to accustom him to the idea that a certain part of the day will usually be spent playing or otherwise interacting with you.

AFTER YOUR BABY IS BORN

- If possible, while you are still at the hospital, try to send home an item of the baby's clothes for your pet to smell to help accustom him to the scent of the baby.
- When you bring the baby home, it's important for at least one other adult to be there to help. This can be an overwhelming time for everyone, and excited or anxious pets can add to the distress. The best strategy may be for you to come in and greet the pet yourself and have someone else carry the baby.
- Once you are home and the pet has had a chance to greet you, you may want to have another adult deal with him while you settle in and attend to the baby. If the pet has become accustomed to staying in a "safe room", behind a gate or in an X-pen, he could be put in that place now.
- Some parents elect to send the dog to a familiar relative for the first day or two after a baby arrives home just to let them settle the baby in without other responsibilities.
- Remember that even the most tolerant pets should never be left unsupervised with babies or young children. It's very tempting to leave the room to answer the phone or turn down the oven, but the baby should go with you or the pet be in his "safe zone".
- If your pet has shown aggression to people, there should always be one adult supervising the pet and one supervising the baby if they are in the same area. Otherwise, the pet should be in his "safe zone".
- Please let us know if your pet shows distress in the presence of the baby or to the crying or other activities of the baby. We can help you with the management of this problem.
- Remember that many pets first become anxious about babies when they become mobile. Be very observant when the baby first scoots and crawls and let us know how that pet reacts to that.
- Babies can inadvertently hurt pets, by pulling on them, stumbling and falling over them, stepping on them. This can cause a pet to react aggressively out of surprise and pain. It's important to supervise babies who can move about when the pet is around, or confine the pet safely away from them.
- Babies and toddlers cannot understand danger, and even if snapped at or scratched by a pet they are unlikely to stay away. Even a child who has had a negative experience with a pet will approach him again. Supervision is essential.

Behavior Medicine

- It is better to work on teaching your child to respect and be gentle with animals than to attempt to teach a pet not to react to rough handling. Even a pet conditioned not to react to such activities can bite without warning if he becomes painful or ill for some reason. Children who are tired or frustrated may escalate their roughness to the point where even a very tolerant pet may react. And a child used to being gentle and appropriate with animals will not be in danger when visiting other households where the pets may not be so tolerant.
- Pets can be very attractive to children when their parents are busy, and children who can move about may go back to the pet again and again when they are not engaged in other activities. When you are busy, it's best to put the pet in his "safe zone" and try to interest the child in something she can do while you work.
- If visitors are a problem for your pet, the arrival of a baby brings new challenges. When adults or other children visit, he should be in his "safe zone". Please let us know if you are having trouble keeping him calm while separated.
- Once your child has other children visiting, the pet should be separated. Even if each visiting child has a parent present, it's too much to expect people to visit with you, attend to their children and watch their children with your pet. Please place the pet in the "safe zone".
- Older children may be curious about the pet and try to open a closed door. A lockable door to the pet's room or even a hook and eye at the top of the door should help.
- Please keep your pet separated from your child when there is food present. A pet can try to snatch a piece of food and make contact with the child instead. A larger pet can knock a child down trying to get food without meaning to be aggressive to the child.
- If your pet steals the baby's toys, please see our handout on Attention Seeking: Stealing. It may help to make sure the pet has a variety of his favorite kinds of toys, and rotating them may help keep them interesting. It may be simplest to gate the pet out of the room where most of the toys are, such as a family room.