

Training your dog: A New Baby in the Pack

This leaflet is intended to help you prepare a normal, well adjusted dog to come to terms with the arrival of a new baby. If your dog has EVER snapped or even growled at anyone, particularly members of your own family, then further advice is recommended.

Introducing a new baby into a household where there is already a resident dog need not present major problems so long as preparations are made in advance so that all members of the 'pack', canine and human, are ready for the lifestyle changes that the arrival of a baby inevitably brings. Any changes to the dog's routine or daily habits should be made as far in advance of the new arrival as possible, so the dog does not associate these changes with the baby and will tolerate it as 'the pack leader's puppy'.

You should start making changes as early as possible, focusing on the four main areas of importance in your dog's life:

1. Feeding:

The dog needs to be entirely trustworthy with the child in the presence of food. This is achieved in the following way:

Divide the dog's daily ration into 2 meals and feed twice a day. This maintains a more constant blood sugar level and helps prevent the dog from experiencing times during the day when he is ravenously hungry and therefore likely to defend his food or snatch at anything dropped (or waved at dog level by small hands).

Feed a complete dry diet rather than a highly palatable tinned food, and don't leave the food down - anything uneaten after 10 minutes should be removed so the dog is unable to regard it as his.

Teach the dog to take titbits only on command, and very gently. Also, teach him not to snatch food dropped on the floor by putting a titbit down, telling him to 'leave it', then picking it up to give to him.

Teach the dog to allow you to approach and handle him while he is eating. Start by adding a tasty morsel to his bowl as he finishes eating. Soon, he should start to wag his tail expectantly as you approach.

Progress to adding the titbit while he is still eating, then to picking up the bowl adding the titbit and putting the bowl down; initially after he has finished eating, then while he is eating his meal. When he is happy with this, start to stroke him as you add the titbit, and as you put the bowl down, gradually increasing the amount of handling so that he becomes used to you touching him and confident that you are not going to take his meal away.

Teach the dog to give up bones and chews in return for a tasty titbit and lots of praise, taking the bone, giving the titbit, then returning the bone.

2. Sleeping:

If the dog is used to sleeping in your bedroom, and you don't want him there when the baby arrives, he should be moved to somewhere more suitable early on in your pregnancy. Similarly, if you don't want him on the furniture, he must learn to stay on the floor as soon as possible, so that the new habit is formed well before the baby arrives. This is particularly important with a dominant 'pack leader' dog.

When your baby starts to crawl, he or she will undoubtedly make a bee-line for your dog, who must learn to get up and move away if he doesn't want to be climbed on. In preparation for this, teach the dog to move out of your way as you move around the house, instead of walking round him.

He should also learn to give up his bed to you, so move him out and sit there yourself! Then invite him in for a cuddle, so he learns to share it.

When the baby starts to crawl, the dog will need a 'safe' place where he knows he can go and not be pestered - provide an area where the crawling baby or determined toddler won't be able to follow. For a large dog, a board across a doorway that he can jump over into a suitable area if you have one will give him the means of escape. Alternatively, an indoor kennel with a comfy bed in it can become a safe haven where you can shut him if necessary - obtain one early in pregnancy, and encourage the dog to settle in it with the door open to begin with.

3. Games and Exercise:

You may not feel much like walking miles immediately following the birth, so if your dog is used to regular long walks, change this gradually by taking him for shorter walks several times a day, then gradually reducing the frequency, so he learns to make do with less. In addition, work on the retrieve exercise, so that you can wear him out easily while staying in one place yourself. Accept offers of help from other people, then to start walking the dog regularly during your pregnancy so the dog learns not to rely on you alone. When you DO feel like going for walks again, a sling for the baby and, later, a suitable back-pack type of baby carrier will go a long way to restoring your former freedom and sanity!

If the dog is used to having his own toys lying around all over the house, he is going to be unable to distinguish between these and baby toys lying around on the floor. Some dogs may try to guard what they see as their own toys, or at least make a nuisance of themselves by constantly taking the baby's toys.

Start by putting the toys away, out of the dog's reach, and then making time every day to play with the dog, teaching him to run and fetch, rather than playing tug of war games, or games where you have to chase the dog! Work on teaching retrieve - a dog that will race after a toy and bring it back to be thrown will be relatively easy to keep exercised and happy, especially if you are restricted by a pram, or just want to sit and rest.

Some dogs get very excited by squeaky toys. If this is the case your dog may become a handful when the baby plays with activity centre type toys and others that squeak. Take away all the dog's squeaky toys and encourage retrieving games instead (as above). In addition, spend time every day squeaking toys while totally ignoring the dog. Keep squeaking until your dog's excitable response diminishes, then put the toy away and quietly praise. In this way, you are desensitising your dog to the sound.

Teach the dog not to touch things lying around on the floor by putting things there and telling him to "leave". Reward with a titbit or a game with his own toy. It can be helpful to associate a particular smell with things he must not touch by puffing a small amount of baby powder, or scent that can initially be sprayed on the baby's toys so he learns not to touch things bearing that particular scent. (Remember, dog's have a highly developed sense of smell, so only a very tiny amount is needed).

4. Grooming and Handling:

The dog must learn to tolerate the sort of handling he is likely to receive from a friendly baby without resentment.

Teach the dog to stand still while you brush him all over, handle his feet and examine eyes, ears and teeth. This teaches the dog that if anyone wants to handle him he must allow them to do so.

General Control & Other Preparations

Short obedience training sessions every day will help improve the dog's willingness to do as he is told. It will also provide a mental stimulus which can be carried on after the birth at a time when he may not be getting very much physical exercise. Ensuring that your dog responds promptly to 'heel', 'sit' and 'down' commands will make it easier to cope with the demands of baby, pram and associated baggage.

Try to take the dog where there are babies and small children - time your walks to coincide with walking past the local school at playtime, and perhaps, if possible, go for walks with a friend who has a baby.

If you can, obtain a tape of a baby crying. Play the tape, ignoring the dog, and praise calm, settled behaviour.

Bringing your baby home:

If the baby is born in hospital, whoever brings used baby clothes home to wash, should allow the dog to have a good sniff before they go in the washing machine.

When you arrive home the dog is likely to be very excited, so leave the baby in the car while you greet and fuss the dog. Bring the baby in when the dog has calmed down, tell the dog to sit, and allow him to have a good look. Provided he is OK, don't hurry things, but don't allow him to jump up. If possible, allow him to investigate quietly until he gets bored, praising good behaviour. Then carry on and get the baby settled in.

Try not to exclude the dog or keep pushing him away when dealing with your baby. Distract him if necessary, or put him in a controlled 'sit' or 'down' close by if he wants to be there. Create a positive association, so the dog regards the baby as something pleasant - talk to the dog while you are handling the baby and vice versa. Make a lot of fuss of the dog in the presence of the baby, and rather less when the baby is not there.

Baby Training (the other side of the picture):

Although it is obviously of prime importance that your dog should be 'baby-proofed' by the methods outlined above, it is also important that your child, learns to respect and handle your dog in the correct way. It is never too soon to start - from a very early age you can take your baby's hand and help him to stroke the dog, gently straightening out his fingers when he tries to grab a handful of fur, talking gently at the same time.

As your child grows, don't allow him or her to pester the dog, but get the child involved in caring for the dog, helping you to feed and groom him and decide where to go for walks etc. Small children can even play retrieve games with the dog under adult supervision - encourage the child to throw the toy and help him or her to take it when the dog brings it back.

The greatest problem you are likely to encounter is when your child thinks he or she can treat every dog the same as yours! Teach them that not all dogs are used to children, and that they must ALWAYS ask the owner of a strange dog before approaching it. Bites from unfamiliar dogs almost always happen because a child has been allowed to approach a strange dog in a public place in an uncontrolled way, and this can so easily be avoided.

Health Concerns

Generally, your dog poses no threat to your baby's health, provided simple hygiene precautions are taken. We also recommend worming for dogs and cats every 3 months to ensure your pet is not carrying roundworms which can affect humans. Worm eggs do not become infective until 24 hours after being passed, so get into the habit of removing faeces and disposing of them as soon as they are voided.

Because of the risk of Toxoplasmosis which may be carried by cats, pregnant women should not handle cat litter trays.

Further Reading:

"Your Dog and Your Baby - a Practical Guide"

Silvia Hartmann-Kent

Doghouse Publications

"Leading the Pack"

Gwen Bailey

Blue Cross, Burford, Oxon

This information has been compiled by Sarah Coton, Head Veterinary Nurse and Canine Behaviour Consultant at our Warwick centre. Further advice is available by appointment



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