

Training Your Dog for the New Baby

Planning for Success

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Daily, family pets are relinquished because of the arrival of a new baby. Hmmm, let's get rid of this one for that one?

Getting rid of the family dog for convenience, unless there are extreme behavioral issues, can have unforeseen and profound consequences.

1. It is stressful and confusing for the dog, and dogs *do* have feelings
2. It can create tension in family relationships
3. A bond of trust and respect has been violated
4. The dog may be thrown into the huge pool of re-homed or destroyed pets
5. It displays to others (and especially if there are other children in the home) that an animal is disposable. Is that the kind of message we want to send?

The normal emotion of anxiety to a new stimulus (baby) can produce unpleasant behaviors that factor into the decision to get rid of a dog. By understanding and training, expectant parents/dog parents can modify that emotion, cultivate good behavior and help the family dog accept the new arrival with little problem.

Before we can change the dog's behavior, however, we have to first change our own behavior!

Some background:

1. Dogs are incredibly sensitive. They are sensitive to changes in our routine and environment, (increased number of trips to the bathroom at night, fluffing the nest, redecorating, etc.). They are aware of changes in barometric pressure (think about dogs who know a storm is approaching!) as well chemical changes emitted from other animals and people: fear, anger, sadness, menses and... pregnancy.
2. Animals experience their surroundings through their senses at an exponentially more heightened degree than do we. Pictures, sounds and smells make strong impressions and associations.
3. We all learn by association.

Expectant parents can be proactive and rehearse some simple exercises as soon as they learn of the pregnancy. These exercises will help your dog feel secure about them self, reduce anxiety and enhance safety for when the new arrival comes home.

The exercises are to purposely expose the dog to the multiple new stimuli (routine, sights, sounds and smell) of a new baby and make these associations pleasant. This is done with enjoyable calm, at very low levels of exposure and with habitual rehearsal.

The purpose is to cultivate the dog's perception, "These (new) changes predict good things for me! I look forward to them!"

What we want to *not* cultivate is a perception that when the new kid on the block appears it predicts, 'Go away!' 'Get out!' 'No!' 'Bad!'"

The Basics:

View your dog as a family member, a friend and yes, a dog. Hopefully this is something you already do, but always worth a reminder.

Be sure your dog is spayed or neutered and has had a recent health check by your veterinarian to be sure there is no underlying ailment that would contribute to being cranky. Any of us have a lower threshold for new things if we are not feeling well.

If anyone in the home has been "rough- housing" or playing "tug of war" with the dog, it would be best to stop, unless the dog is well trained to stop on cue. Otherwise, this kind of activity can pose a problem in the wrong context.

If you have not enrolled in a behavior training class, please consider this as worthwhile investment. The class should be re-ward-based that does not use physical punishment. If it is not obvious that you are pregnant, indicate this to the instructor and let him/her know you are especially preparing your dog for the new baby. (I have learned by experience that you don't ask a woman if they are pregnant) ☹ .

Socialize your dog as much as possible. Expose him/her to favorable pleasantries outside the confines of your home and yard so he has a "global" experience.

Order in the Family:

Some degree of pack/social order will help your dog feel secure when the new arrival enters the dog's life. Although many of us treat our dogs like little "fur babies," they are not babies with fur. They are dogs whose genetic wiring deserve due respect. Dogs are followers and feel more secure if there is a thoughtful and benevolent leader.

If you have been treating your dog like a surrogate child, you may be in for a rude awakening. Jealousy is an emotion experienced by animals and can rear an ugly head if baby #1 (your dog) suddenly becomes displaced by the new baby #1. The last thing you want is for this new little human to be competition for attention.

Respectfully "demote" your dog. If the dog is sleeping in your bed, consider relocating their sleeping area to the floor sooner than later. The last thing you want is to admonish and/or banish the dog from your emotional and physical space in association with the presence of the new baby. You want to avoid competition for a coveted space. This is why we want to have the "sleeping on the bed" issue resolved *before* the arrival.

You can succeed at this relocation with a comfortable dog bed next to yours. Make it a special place. Occasionally let the dog find a couple of favorite kibble treats there. If the dog is continually hopping back up on your bed, a short tether or lead attached to the collar and secured to the leg of the bed can resolve that issue.

While you're at it, it is best to decide if there will be any room restrictions *prior* to the baby coming home.

Cultivating impulse control:

Consider putting into place a program of, "No free lunch." Eliminate "freebies." This means that "to get something", the dog has to "do something." Example: before getting a scratch behind the ears, ask for a "sit." Before allowing eating, your dog has to wait with composure until you get the food bowl on the floor. Before the dog gets to go out the doorway, he has to wait, etc. In other words, we want a dog that offers deference, or "gentle yielding" instead of barging and getting what he wants "on demand."

At the end of this article are some simple exercises (think of them as "games") to practice to help the dog with impulse control.*

Assault of the Senses:

Think about the many different sights, sounds and smells that will be suddenly thrust into your dog's world. Without preparation these can be offensive and overwhelming.

First impressions are important! Make the special effort to introduce these new sense experiences at very low levels with a calm, positive association! Over weeks, gradually increase the intensity of these exposures. This routine change, shape, sound, smell = nice feelings for the dog.

How to go about this:

Sight

Acquire a baby-size doll. Hold and carry it in your arms like you will be doing and every time you do this talk nicely to your dog and even toss some favorite treats on the ground or offer them from your hand. Use a mantra like, "Here is our new family member" (or use the baby's name if you have one). The tone of your voice, your attitude and the verbal signal will all cue the dog that this new experience is something that has good things to offer the dog. When the baby doll goes away, treats disappear and attention to the dog is faded out. Nothing special happens.

Sounds

Visit the church nursery or a friend who has a new baby and record the crying and sounds. With all the new technology at our fingertips, you can do this with your phone. At home carry the recording device in a little blanket with the doll and play the sounds softly. As your dog listens, talk soothingly to the dog and make nice things happen.

Treats and calm, extra attention. Put the baby and sounds “to bed” and that equates to some time of boredom for Fido.

Smells

Introduce your dog to the different smells a baby will provide. This includes baby powder and lotion. Think about bringing home some cloth (diaper or towel) that has another baby’s smell on it and introduce it to your dog with an affectionate association and special treats. When this new smell(s) goes away, all the extra’s for the dog also go away. Boring.

Go through these ceremonies when you get up at night to go to the bathroom (if your dog is close by) because this will be the program when the “Real McCoy” is on the scene. The more your dog is conditioned to these new sights, sounds and smells at different hours - the more comfortable he/she will be with what creates them. Acquaint the dog with a soothing, positive association with all the new items that you bring into the house that will be baby related: baby swing, crib and other “stuff.”

Coming Home

If dad can bring home a diaper or cloth from the hospital and rehearse the good association with the dog the day before the homecoming, great. (Don’t give it to the dog to carry around and shake!).

It is always a plus to have a tired dog, especially if it is one that is high energy. If a family member or friend has the opportunity to exercise the dog prior to arrival - that would be a good thing. A tired dog is a lot less anxious.

Have the dog leashed if it is a big dog. Have dad or another person hold the baby as mom greets the dog. She’ll be carrying all those smells the dog has come to learn as good associations. After settling in, let mom re-greet the dog with baby in arms. Don’t offer the baby out towards the dog to sniff. This may be too much too fast and they might think you’re giving baby to them! Rehearse the ritual you’ve been practicing for this moment. Baby is here and with calm and affection in your voice and hand, *extra special* treats for the dog. Nice, slow petting o.k. too. Avoid baby at face level with the dog.

Safety

There is a saying, “There are no such things as accidents, only careless people.”

This emphasis cannot be too strong: Never leave your baby alone with the dog. Never. Babies do not behave or sound like humans your dog is used to experiencing. To a dog, babies can look, sound and move like little wounded animals.

Aggression / Resource Guarding / Predatory Issues

If expectant parents have a dog with these issues, it would be best to consult with a knowledgeable behavior trainer.

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Exercise Games

Rehearse these “exercise games” with your dog to gently help them learn manners and self control. These will also cultivate a respectful regard for the parents as the pack “leader.” Pack leaders thoughtfully control and allocate resources, they do not yell and hit. The dog will also appreciate the structure these exercises provide.

Object Exchange

Practice being able to take away objects from your dog’s mouth by exchanging for an item of higher value. Begin this game by providing to the dog objects of low level interest and gradually work toward more desirous items. A tasty food/treat under their nose is often a good exchange. When the dog drops or relinquishes the item, say “Out” or “Release,” reward the dog with the treat and say, “Thank you.” They can have it back if you want. Repeat.

If the dog fails to easily relinquish the item, this means the exercise tried to graduate up the value-ladder too fast and more rehearsing with lower value items is needed.

Anticipate that a female dog may want to acquire dirty diapers. Female dogs inherently might want to consume the feces of newborns for the dual purposes of nutrition and cleanliness. Don’t go crazy, exchange for the diaper as described above.

Pain Tolerance

Increase your dog’s tolerance to discomfort to raise their pain threshold. *Lightly* pinch or grab the fur and in a split second offer a good food/treat reward for tolerating this discomfort. Do this to all areas of the body, tail, ears etc., gradually increasing the discomfort by small degrees. Pinch/Reward. Pinch/Reward. Make sessions brief but routine and in different areas of the house. Be realistic and don’t proceed faster than your dog can tolerate.

Anticipate that as the baby begins to ambulate, the dog might be grabbed by little hands.

Hand Feeding

Everybody should feed their dog from their hand, thoughtfully. Ration out the dog’s food and use it to reward the dog for doing things you want, like come to you, waiting, sitting.

If a dog takes food too aggressively from your fingers, help them to inhibit the force of their mouth. Start with low value food imbedded in the tips of your thumb, second and third fingers and offer to the dog. If the dog tries to take it too harshly, no food is delivered and you might turn to the side for a moment and pretend to eat the treat yourself. This behavior (hard mouth) = that consequence (food goes in person’s mouth).

Offer the treat again. At the first experience of the dog offering to take the food with a gentler mouth, provide the food from your fingertips. Move up the food value chain at the dog's pace.

Expect that there will be a time when the baby has something in their hand the dog will want, or the baby will offer it to the dog.

Food Bowl Exercise

If dog approaches food bowl when placing it to the ground, bowl goes away. Repeat until you are able to achieve placement of the bowl on the ground and dog waits for approval to have the food. In the sequence of getting the bowl to the ground, reward the dog at each progression of success. Example, if dog remains composed positioning the bowl at three feet off the ground – reward. Progress to successful composure with the bowl two feet off the ground – reward, etc.

The objective is to develop impulse control. “I want it, I wait, I get it.”

Hand approaching food bowl

With dog present, bring hand with dry food in palm and place in bowl. Let dog eat. Repeat several times. Next, have uninteresting food in bowl and bring hand with *better* food to introduce into the bowl. The idea here is to condition the dog that a hand coming *toward* the food bowl is approaching *to give something better!* Practice taking away the dog's food bowl and replacing it.

The objective is to condition the dog to tolerating hands fuddling with their food because there may be a time when dog and baby cross paths at the dog's food bowl.

Doorway Exercise

The habit of barging through doorways should be modified to where the dog waits for approval to exit. Life is easier and calmer if dogs are trained to “wait.” Door opening = wait. This is done much like the food bowl exercise (or any exercise for that matter) in (uh hm) “baby steps.”

Hand approaches the doorknob- if dog remains steady – reward dog with a treat. If dog gets crazy - hand withdraws from the door knob and back to your side. At any stage of the door opening game if the dog thinks about moving to get through the door, the door closes or you position your body to claim that space. “Pushy” behavior results in the consequence of no access to the outside (the reward itself). “Self control” = access to the outdoors.

It's pretty handy that when a parent is loaded down with a baby in arm, a purse and diaper bag that an open door predicts “wait.”

Summary

Having a baby come into the family universe is a life changing experience and a lot of activity is set in motion. For expectant parents this is a good time to remember that the dog is also a family member who could use a little support to help accept these new changes. By spending just a few mindful minutes a day helping the dog with self control and experiencing positive associations, pet parents can know that they have taken a proactive approach to enhancing a good outcome for all when they step through that door with the new family member. Enjoy the process.

~Woofs



Bio:

*Warren Patitz and associates provide human training for understanding dog behavior in the Indy Metro area through **Doggone Connection**. www.doggoneconnection.com*

As a parent with four children, a household of multiple dogs, emergency health care provider, student of dog behavior and advocate for the respectful treatment of animals, Warren has a special affection for preventing relinquishment and children/dog safety.