

Training Your Dog for the New Baby

Planning for Success

Warren G. Patitz
Copyright 2003

Daily, family pets are unnecessarily relinquished because of the pending arrival of a new baby, (which begs the question, was the animal considered part of the family in the first place?). As a father of 4 children, dog behavior training instructor, former emergency department nurse and member of a multiple-animal household, I have a special affection for promoting a thoughtful preparation for the introduction of a family's preexisting dog to a new baby. The "throw away" mentality as it relates to animals does not offer a healthy reflection either to our children or of ourselves. Respecting the confusing conditions under which our dogs often live, relinquishing them as a matter of convenience only adds to that insult. Have a dog and expecting a baby? Let's see what can be done to prepare for this exciting event to alleviate anticipated stress and confusion as well as ensure safety and comfort. The question is, how do we get to the other side of this challenge together?

It is helpful to remember that dogs (as well as humans) learn by association. Dogs pick up on changes in the routine and environment well in advance of what most people commonly think. If you are pregnant, your dog is already aware of a difference in your scent because of hormonal changes. Chances are you are making more frequent trips to the bathroom. Your assignment is to begin to purposely expose your dog, at low levels and with a positive association, to the various changes that a new baby will bring forth. This includes changes not only in routine, but exposure to sights, sounds and smells that, without preparation, can be overwhelming and frightening for your dog. This is called "desensitization". This preparation will give your dog every opportunity to become conditioned to willingly accept the new "pack" member. Your goal is that the dog translates, "These changes predict good things for me and I look forward to them!"

The time to start preparing your dog for the new arrival is today.

Basics:

Please be sure your dog is spayed or neutered and has had a recent health check by your veterinarian.

If anyone in the home has been "rough-housing" or playing "tug of war" with the dog, this should stop. This kind of behavior can pose a problem in the wrong context and it is best to not encourage the dog to rehearse this.

If you have not enrolled in a behavior training class, please consider this a worthwhile investment. If it is not obvious that you are pregnant, please indicate so to the instructor (this author has learned by experience that you don't ask a woman with extra belly poundage if they are pregnant ☺) and that you are especially preparing your dog for the new baby. An experienced instructor can be of great assistance in this regard.

Socialize your dog as much as possible. Expose him to favorable experiences outside the confines of your home and yard so he has more of a “global” experience.

Order in the Family:

If you have been treating your dog like a surrogate child, you’re in for a rude awakening. Jealousy will rear its ugly head if your baby #1 (your dog) suddenly becomes displaced by the new baby #1. The last thing you want is for this new human baby to be competition for attention.

“Demote” your dog. If the dog is sleeping in your bed, as hard as this is to swallow, get him sleeping on the floor now. Competition for privileged bed space is something you will not want and it is better to resolve this space issue now, *before* the baby arrives. While you’re at it, it is best to decide if there will be any space or room restrictions prior to coming home with the baby.

Put into place a program of “No free lunch”. Eliminate extra “freebies.” This means that to “get something”, the dog has to “do something”. Example. Before getting a scratch behind the ears, the dog has to sit. Before getting to eat, 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 with “on demand,” (see **Game-Exercises** below).

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 confusing. First impressions are important! Instead, make an extra effort to introduce these new experiences at very low levels with a positive association! Over weeks, gradually increase the intensity of these exposures, “This shape, sound, smell = nice feelings for me.”

The goal is to condition the dog to look forward to this new experience because all the practicing and simulation has indicated it to be an agreeable expectation. The last thing you want is to admonish and/or banish it from your emotional and physical space because if you do, the dog will associate this new treatment with the presence of the new baby, and indeed, the association will be that the new baby caused this cold treatment. This is why we want to have the “sleeping on the bed” issue resolved before the arrival!

How to go about it:

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 mantra 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 affectionate talk is faded out. Nothing special happens for the dog.

Visit the church nursery or a friend who has a new baby and record the crying and sounds of a new baby. At home carry the recorder in a little blanket and play the sounds softly. As your dog listens, talk soothingly to the dog and make nice things happen, treats, praise extra attention. Put the sounds “to bed” and special things for the dog also go to sleep.

Introduce your dog to the different smells a baby will provide. This includes baby powder and lotion on your skin. 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 extra special treats. When this goes away, extra attention, affection and rewards go away. 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” appears and the more your dog is conditioned to these new sights, sounds and smells at different hours the more comfortable he will be with what causes them. Acquaint the dog with a 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 from the hospital and rehearse the good association with the dog the day before, great. (Don’t give it to the dog to carry around and shake!). On coming home day, it is always a plus to have a tired dog. It is nice if a family member or friend has the opportunity to exercise the dog prior to arrival. A tired dog is a lot less anxious. Have dad hold the baby as mom greets the dog. Have the dog leashed if it is a big dog. After settling in let mom greet the dog with baby in arms. Don’t offer the baby out towards the dog to sniff. He might think you’re giving it to him! Rehearse the same ritual you’ve been practicing for this moment. Baby present and you are affectionate with your voice and *extra special* (I repeat *extra special*, remember first impressions?) treats for the dog. Try to avoid admonishing or yelling at your dog when the baby is present.

Safety:

The emphasis cannot be too strong: Never leave you baby alone with the dog. Never. Babies do not behave or sound like humans your dog is used to. To your dog, they look and sound like little wounded animals and in your absence that can trigger a response that is inherent in any dog. There is an oriental saying, “There are no such things as accidents, only careless people.”

Aggression / Resource Guarding / Predatory Issues:

It is beyond the scope of this article to address the concerns posed by a dog with aggression, resource guarding (dog growls if you approach his food bowl or try to remove his toy) or strong predatory behaviors. If you have a concern that you have a dog with these issues, it would be best to consult with a knowledgeable trainer or dog behaviorist. (Anticipate that a female dog may want to acquire the dirty diapers. Female dogs inherently will consume the feces of newborns for the dual purposes of nutrition and cleanliness. Do not be disturbed by this and exchange the diaper as described below).

Your dog is an important member of your family and helping him or her to feel comfortable and at ease with the new changes a baby will bring into the home shows your affection to the “forever-home” commitment your dog deserves!

Game-Exercises:

Rehearse these “game-exercises” with your dog to gently help them learn manners, composure as well as have a respectful regard for you, the “leader” of the pack, (pack leaders control resources, they’re not the ones who yell and hit). Your dog will also appreciate the structure these exercises provide.

Object Exchange: Practice being able to take away objects from your dog’s mouth using food/treat exchange. Begin with *low level* interest objects and gradually work toward more coveted items. If your dog fails to easily relinquish the item, this means you’ve tried to graduate up the value ladder too fast.

Pain Tolerance: Increase your dog’s tolerance to discomfort to raise his threshold. Lightly pinch or grab the fur, food reward for tolerating. Do this to all areas of the body, increasing the discomfort in gradual degrees. Pinch/Reward. Pinch/Reward. Make sessions brief but routine. Be realistic and don’t proceed faster than your dog can tolerate.

Food Bowl Exercise: If dog approaches food bowl when placing 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.

Hand approaching food bowl: Bring hand with dry food and place in bowl. 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.

Hand Feeding: Feed from your hand, frequently. Ration out the dog’s food and he has to come to you and sit for a nibble of food. YOU control all the resources.

Doorway Exercise: The habit of barging through doorways should be modified to where the dog waits for approval. This is done much like the food bowl exercise. Hand approaching the doorknob withdraws if dog gets anxious about the opening of the door. At each stage of the opening if the dog pushes to get through the door, the door closes. Thus, “pushy behavior” results in the consequence of no access to the outside, the prized outcome. “Reserved” behavior or “good manners” gets access to the outdoors. Proceed through steps to where you get the door opened and dog is waiting for approval to go through.

Thanks for visiting. Please pass this on to those who would benefit from this information.