



INTRODUCING THE DOG TO A NEW BABY

You or your family is expecting a new baby; however, you already have a "child," the family dog. The dog has been a member of the household since puppyhood and is very attached to you. He often attempts to wedge himself between you and visitors when the visitors get too close. He seems "jealous" of visitors and you are worried how he will react to the baby. Will he be depressed? Not eat? Sulk? Get destructive and spiteful? Worse, could he get so jealous that he hurts the baby? Are you wondering if these concerns are legitimate? What can be done to prevent problems before and after the new baby arrives?

Social & Parental Behaviors of Dogs

The nature of canids-wolves and dogs is that of the family group, normally two dominant adults and related individuals of various ages. Usually only the two dominant adults breed, yet all members of the pack help care for the mother and pups, guarding them and bringing meat back to them. Subordinate females may "baby-sit" or help nurse the puppies. Pet dogs relate to you and other family members as if they were members of the family. Ideally, your baby will be accepted by the dog as an offspring included in its "pack." Dogs are more likely to be over protective of an infant they are to be "jealous."

Most problems arise between a dog and child when the child reaches the crawling and walking stages, at about a year or so. Nonetheless, there is the *potential* for problems occurring at any time and you need to insure that your baby is safe. The most serious potential problem is that your dog may fail to recognize that the new baby should be included in its "pack." Dogs that are unfamiliar with the look, smell, or sound of a baby may interpret the baby as prey. It is your job to teach your dog that your child is part of the family unit.

Dogs' Reactions to a Baby

Most dogs are curious about babies. Observe your dog around babies, either in your home, on the street, or in other people's homes. Be aware of your dog's typical reactions and be sure to take whatever precautions are necessary to insure everyone's safety. Most dogs quickly learn to accept the presence of a new baby. However, since the potential consequences are so serious, take every safety precaution possible, regardless how your dog has reacted in previous encounters with babies.

One of your main considerations is that your baby may be accidentally hurt as a dog attempts to investigate or play with the child. An extremely active dog, for example, can accidentally injure a baby while jumping up on the owner or cause an accident while running around. These types of problems can be avoided if your dog is trained.

Of course, dogs with a history of aggression toward people require special caution. An aggressive dog that reacts to visitors, mail carriers, and other dogs can injure a baby if the child happens to come between the dog and the object of its aggression. Dogs that become aggressive when approached while eating or in possession of a bone, toy, or other favorite item or that become aggressive if startled or when awakened require especially close supervision in the presence of a baby.

The most potentially dangerous reaction on the part of your dog around children is predatory. Extra caution should be taken if your dog has a history of predatory behavior like chasing and/or killing small game, especially if it has been bred for this purpose. This tip has special significance if a dog has had little or no exposure to infants. You also need to realize that exposure to and interaction with small children is *NOT* the same as exposure to and interaction with an infant. Just because your dog plays in a friendly, gentle manner with children, does not mean it will react the same way to a baby. Infants are very different than children. Children are usually, although not always, interpreted by dogs as people; infants may not be.

Each year, a few infants are severely injured or killed by dogs because of owner or parent negligence. The number is very small compared to, for instance, the many thousands of infants in the U.S. are victims of automobile accidents, burns, drownings, chokings, suffocations, and poisonings. Although the risk is small, precautions will insure your baby never becomes a "statistic."

Monitoring Your Dog's Behavior.

First of all, all interactions between your baby and your dog need to be monitored carefully. Never leave a baby or small child UNATTENDED with a dog for ANY REASON.

To help your dog learn that the baby belongs in your family, expose the dog to the baby in a very gradual and controlled manner. The exposure should be positive so the dog does not associate unpleasant situations with the baby or feel anxious or aggressive in the baby's presence.

Introducing Dogs to Babies

Suggestions to help your dog adjust to the baby:

1. Getting Ready for the Arrival. Preparations should begin months before the baby arrives. If your dog does not know how to sit, stay, lie down, or come when called, teach it to do so. If your dog knows the commands but is unreliable, practice until it is. "Pretty good," is not good enough and could lead you to a false sense of security. How will your dog react when you bring the baby home? Can you depend on it to sit or down and STAY and not rush toward the baby?

If you have not had experience training a dog, get professional help, either in an obedience class or at home. Make sure it is a good, *humane* training class. You want your dog to have positive associations with the various obedience commands. Although you may need to be corrected your dog on occasion, force should be avoided if at all possible.

The goal is for the dog to like you and the baby not obey because it is frightened or afraid of being punished. Once your dog learns the basic sit/stay and down/stay commands, you should start requiring that your dog sit/stay or down/stay as you do things that resemble "baby activities" around it. For example, pick up a doll, cradle it, rock it, and walk back and forth. Periodically reward the dog with tidbits, petting, or praise for remaining in a down position while this is going on. The doll should also be wrapped in baby blankets and shown to the dog, which must learn to control itself and to refrain from moving. Because dogs will respond with interest to strange sounds, it is a good idea to accustom your dog to the recorded sounds of a baby crying, babbling, or making other normal "baby" sounds.

Ideally, if you can arrange it, expose your dog - in a controlled situation to ensure the infant's safety - to real babies of friends or neighbors. This should only be done after the dog is reliably trained and controllable. Then., the dog should gradually be exposed to babies until it can remain relaxed around them. This usually takes several sessions.

If your baby is born in a hospital, the dog will remain at home. Use this time to help your dog become familiar with the baby's smell by bringing home blankets or clothing the baby has worn. (Keep soiled diapers in a tightly closed container! One of the functions of a mother dog is to clean up urine and feces to keep the sleeping area clean. Often, female dogs will ingest the feces of a human baby and may go to great lengths to clean up after the child, including raiding diaper buckets!)

2. Bringing Your Baby Home. When mother and baby come home from the hospital, it is best if mother greets the dog without the baby present. The baby should be held by another family member or, better still, put in another room while the mother and dog greet each other. This way, you can avoid reprimanding an overly-excited dog that merely wants to greet the owner that might jump on the baby in an attempt to greet the mother.

Owners should allow time for the dog to get used to the smells and sounds of the baby. Later, when the level of excitement has gone down and the dog appears relaxed, you can introduce them to each other.

One parent should tend to the baby and the other to the dog. The dog should be on leash and in a down/stay. If you think that the dog may jump at the baby, put a halter or muzzle on the dog. (The dog should be used to the muzzle prior to this introduction.) First, allow the dog to see the baby from 10 to 15 feet away. Reward the dog. Then, slowly, bring the baby closer to the dog, rewarding the dog with each step. If the dog remains calm and in the down/stay, allow it to sniff the baby from a safe distance. If the dog is extremely excited, do not keep progressing toward the dog. Repeat this exercise over and over for a few days first. If your dog has a history of predatory and/or aggressive behaviors, you may have to make a number of these "introductions" before allowing the dog close enough to investigate the baby.

Always err on the side of caution when determining when a dog is ready to approach a baby closely enough to sniff the baby. However long it takes, eventually, the dog should be allowed to smell the baby up close. Eventually, when you are sure how the dog is going to react around the baby, you can unleash it. (This does not mean unsupervised visits or that you should lay the child down for the dog to investigate it.) As a continued precaution, the dog should continue to wear a comfortable muzzle when around the baby.

3. The First Several Days and Thereafter. Remember, your dog should never have unsupervised access to your baby - EVER. You will also want to be especially careful when the baby is screaming, crying, or waving its arms and legs. These acts can bring out a predatory, investigatory, or play-leap reaction in your dog. It is wiser to put the dog in another room or in a down/stay several feet away from the baby.

Some dogs begin to "act up" after a new baby arrives. It is unclear if such behaviors is because of "jealousy" or because the dog is being deprived of its usual and expected amount of attention and affection. You should start reducing the amount of attention you pay to your dog 2 or 3 months prior to a baby's arrival so the dog accepts it is no longer the "focus" of your attention. When your baby arrives, take extra steps to insure that your dog gets sufficient attention. One tip is, whenever you do anything to or with your baby, put the dog in a sit/stay and periodically reward the dog with a treat. This helps the dog associate pleasant experiences (getting treats and extra attention) with the baby when the baby is present.

If after the first several days you are still concerned that your dog might harm your baby, a screen door or gate can be fastened at the entrance to the baby's room. This allows you to hear the baby but stops your dog's access to the room.

Keep in mind when you take your baby to visit friends or relatives that their dogs may not be accustomed to having a baby in their homes. Baby-sitters should be cautioned not to bring dogs with them when they babysit.

Conclusion. As a new parent, you need to be aware of potential problems, however, you should not worry excessively about them. Most dogs adjust to new babies easily, quietly, and without any problems. If you are observant of your dog's behavior, and take precautions to introduce dog and baby gradually while your dog is under control, you should be able to avoid incidents. HOWEVER, babies and small children should NEVER be left unsupervised with a dog, not even for a second. Tragic incidents have occurred when adults mistakenly believed a dog was in the backyard or securely confined.

4. For Those Times That You "Just Can't Take it Anymore." You have a new baby. You are over-whelmed by the responsibility. The dog is just adding to your problems. PREPARE ahead for this situation. Invest in a crate *before the baby arrives* and teach your dog how to go into it on command and accept that when the door is closed it has to stay in the crate quietly. Buy bubble bath and, once you kennel the dog and quiet the baby, take the phone off the hook and take a long, hot soak. You deserve it!

Should you have additional questions, call Responsible Animal Owners of Tennessee at (901) 353-1805.