

Bringing a baby home to your pet



Written by Andrea Leigh Ptak

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You've just found out you're pregnant, and well-meaning friends are already telling you that Fido and Fluffy have got to go. Old wives' tales abound about babies and pets, from the ridiculous "a cat will suck the baby's breath" to the plausible "the baby will develop allergies." The truth is: Babies and pets can coexist - and, as research shows, often benefit from doing so.

For parents of a new baby, life will change dramatically as you adjust to the new routines and needs of an infant. The same holds true for the family pet. If your pet has never encountered an infant, it's a good idea to introduce it to one long before baby arrives. If possible, invite friends with babies to spend an afternoon at your home, exposing your pet to those special sounds and smells that only babies make. If baby's room will be off limits to your pet, start restricting access now, so it does not associate the new rules with the baby.



Animals need not be restricted due to fear of allergic reactions. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2002 found that children raised with two or more pets had a reduced risk of developing allergies - by 50 percent or more. And, according to the study, babies are just as likely to be allergic to dust or mold, so if symptoms are present, a pediatric allergist should be consulted before automatically getting rid of a pet.

Preparing for baby's arrival

Before baby arrives, start to pull back on the time spent with your pet to accustom it to a baby-centric schedule. Take your pet to the veterinarian for a check-up and make sure vaccinations are up-to-date. Daily brushing will minimize pet hair around the house, and trimmed nails help avoid accidental scratches. If a different family member will be assuming responsibility for the pet after the baby's arrival, start that routine as early as possible.

Let the pet sniff and explore a blanket or clothing that has been in contact with the baby before he or she comes home from the hospital. Introduce the baby cautiously, but without fear. Praise the pet for appropriate behavior.

The canine factor

If you have never formally trained your dog, enroll in a basic obedience class immediately. Nancy Peterson of the Humane Society of the United States notes, "Training and socialization are the important factors. The pet needs to be exposed to all kinds of things so they can learn not to be frightened." Training gives you better control over your dog. Commands such as "sit," "stay" and "off" will be invaluable in helping your dog learn proper behavior around your baby.

Dogs are pack animals and very aware of their position. The new baby will knock your dog down a peg, so it's important to use positive reinforcement when training and disciplining your dog. If your dog is fearful, easily excited or exhibits other undesirable traits, such as food aggression, you should consider a few sessions with an animal behaviorist.

Dog toys often resemble baby toys. A dog that loves to chew up its own stuffed animals will want baby's toys as well and won't know the difference. Before your baby arrives, switch to dog-specific toys to help avoid confusion. A dog that responds to "leave it" can be taught which toys are off limits.

The feline factor

Cats come with their own set of baby-specific issues. Consummate heat-seekers, they will be attracted to a warm baby in a cozy crib. And although "breath sucking" is not an issue, it's not a good idea to have a cat sleep in the same room as a newborn. It's best to restrict access to the baby's room without adult supervision. It's smart to apply some double-stick tape to the surfaces in the baby's room, as cats avoid sticky surfaces and will steer clear.

As baby grows

Once your infant is mobile, new precautions are necessary. Dogs will camp out under a highchair hoping for dropped food - great for clean-up, but be wary of dogs that are able to jump or stand high enough to reach food in baby's fingers. It's essential that your dog be trained to respond to "off" in this context. Dogs also need to be trained not to snatch food or toys from a toddler's grasp.

Adult supervision is a necessity when babies and pets interact. Babies have a natural affinity for animals and will instinctively grab, yank or poke, which could result in a warning nip or scratch. Teach the baby to treat the pet gently, and a lifelong friendship will result.

Andrea Leigh Ptak has written about the human-animal bond for Delta Society's Interactions magazine, American Girl and Stars & Stripes. She introduced her own baby to a household with two dogs and two cats 12 years ago, with successful results.

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