

How to Introduce Pets to a New Baby

BACKGROUND

Each pet may react differently to a new baby, regardless of the pet's age, size, or species. Ensuring your pet has been appropriately exposed to a variety of people and situations when they are young is essential to their ability to acclimate to change. However, older pets do still have the ability to acclimate to a new baby. Creating a positive association with the baby and encouraging calm behavior is critical to the perception the pet will develop about the baby.

GETTING STARTED

Talk to your veterinarian well before you bring your baby home to discuss your particular situation and create a plan to acclimate your pet(s) to the upcoming family addition. Any change in schedule or environment can cause your pet stress. Making gradual changes in the schedule and environment during pregnancy can help when the new baby arrives and additional changes need to occur. For example, set up baby gates and allow your pet to get used to limited access to certain areas of the home. Other examples include getting the pet used to baby furniture, product odors, and sounds. Although things will change with the arrival of your new baby, you can minimize your pet's stress by gradually getting him/her used to as many of these changes in advance as is possible. Plan and practice the changes to your routines prior to the baby's arrival, such as changes to when you walk your pet or adding naps to the daily routine. Consideration may be given to pet day care or hiring a pet-sitter to prepare your pet for the times when you cannot walk or play with them as much as you have in the past.

SETTING UP

Many pets become excited when an owner comes home, especially if the owner has been away for a few days. If possible, have someone exercise the pet (e.g., go for a walk or play outside) prior to arriving home with the new baby, to decrease some of that excited energy. Have another person hold the baby so that you can greet your pet when you come in the door. You can also allow the pet to smell a clothing item or blanket that the baby has worn (in fact, a partner or friend can do this even before the baby comes home, praising the pet as he or she investigates the smell of the item). At no time should a pet and a baby ever be left alone together. Once the initial excitement of your homecoming has subsided, introduce your pet(s) to the baby, one-on-one. Using a leash or halter may be beneficial to limit any inappropriate responses. Watch your pet's behavior carefully to note any signs of aggressive or unacceptable behavior (e.g., jumping up, pawing at the baby), which is an immediate reason to put an end to that interaction. Pets are an important part of the household, and do not need to be ostracized or re-homed when a new baby arrives. However, injury and bite-prevention is extremely important, and parents should understand the body postures and communication cues for each species of pet in the home in order

to recognize signs of fear, discomfort, stress, and aggression. If you have any questions about these clues, your veterinarian can help direct you to reliable resources. If the pet shows any aggressive behavior, they should be segregated to a separate area, and you should contact your veterinarian for a behavioral consultation.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Teaching your pet foundation behaviors (sit, stay, come, etc.) will also help prevent problems between your pet and baby. Having good verbal control of your pet can really help when it comes to juggling his/her needs and the baby's care. Ensure your pet knows how to sit and stay reliably, and even teaching a cue for a pet to go to his or her kennel/bed may be useful. For nuisance behaviors, such as jumping up or pawing, teach the pet an alternate behavior for situations when those responses occur. Pets who are allowed on furniture or who may take baby items (pacifiers, bottles, toys) will benefit from learning an "off" cue or a "drop it/leave it" cue prior to the baby coming home. These two behaviors can help teach your pet to leave the baby's things alone and can help your cat or dog learn to control his/her impulses in many situations. Some examples of new rules for the pet, like staying off the furniture and restrictions on access to the nursery, crating, or car seat, should be gradually enforced prior to the baby's arrival.

PROCEDURE

Baby sounds and movements can be intriguing as well as startling or scary to a pet, and the reaction of a pet and baby are not always predictable. Therefore, direct adult supervision should be maintained at all times when your pet and your baby are in the same area. Your pet should not have to be excluded from areas where the baby will be; however, any access should be strictly managed to prevent any unsafe interactions. Pets should not be allowed to sleep in a room with an unattended infant or small child. If your pet is calm and comfortable around the baby, gradual supervised interactions are appropriate. Pair the interactions with positive reinforcement (praise, treats) so the pet associates those interactions favorably.

AFTERWARDS

As your child grows, teach him or her to be careful around pets, how to appropriately interact, and how to recognize signs of fear, anxiety, stress, and aggression in different pet species. Do not allow children to grab, pull, or crawl on your pet, and never allow children to interact with a pet while the pet is eating or has toys/treats. Children should be taught not to wake a sleeping pet. While teaching children about safe and kind treatment of animals is vital, it is unreasonable to expect that toddlers can control their impulses. It remains important for an adult to supervise the time young children spend with pets even after the child is no longer an infant. Children mimic adult behavior, so be a model for appropriate interaction, and do not use physical punishment or force with your pet.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is it true that cats can suffocate babies?

This is an old myth dating from at least the time of the Salem witch trials but with no basis in reality. However, it is never

appropriate to leave a sleeping infant alone with any pet without adult supervision.

AUTHOR: Desiree Broach, DVM, MS, DACVB; Christine D. Calder, DVM, DACVB

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.