

# The Dogs vs. The New Baby

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We love our dogs; they are our companions, friends, solace and even surrogate children...until you realize that you are expecting a human baby, that is. Now, well-meaning friends, family members and neighbors start the horror stories – stories that inevitably end up with the formerly friendly family dogs growling at, biting and even killing a newborn baby. Their advice: "Get rid of the dog."

If you have a second baby, will you get rid of the first if there is any sibling rivalry? It's the same thing. Your 1<sup>st</sup> baby, the furry one, deserves the same love and respect from you that they have given you. Before you start calling your local vet, rescue, or animal shelter, why not PREPARE your dog for the new addition?

It can be done, it's easy and you won't have sleepless nights wondering what happened to your former best friend.

The worst thing you, as a pet parent, can do is start your dog's introduction to the baby when you bring the baby home for the first time. Remember, you have had 9 months to prepare for the change in your life; your dog needs the same.

## **How realistic is the threat?**

Many thousands of infants in the U.S. are victims of automobile accidents, burns, drowning, choking, suffocation, and poisoning. In contrast, VERY few infants are severely injured by dogs each year and even fewer are killed. In the entire United States, dogs are blamed with causing approximately 8 infants deaths per year. Although the risk is small, there is cause for concern about a dog's reaction to your baby. The following precautions will help insure that your baby does not become a "statistic."

## **Before the Baby:**

Anytime you enter your dog into a new and potentially confusing or upsetting situation, it is important that your dog feels that they can rely on you – no matter what. This type of bond does not form itself overnight. It is a bond of trust, and your dog must know to trust you.

## **Obedience Training**

Imagine how your dog, excited to see mommy home again, will react when walk in carrying the newborn. Can you depend on it to reliably sit and stay or down and stay and not rush toward the baby?

Your dog needs to reliably respond to the "Basic 5": sit, stay, lie down, come when called and leave it. If your dog does not, you should enroll your dog in a group obedience class. A group class will teach your dog how to responds to all commands – even in a distracting environment. What ever class you take, make sure that corrective or forcible methods are avoided. The goal is to make a strong bond of trust, where your dog responds in a kind and calm manner, not because it is frightened or afraid of being punished.

A group class by itself won't be enough – you need to make a conscious effort to continue the training (5 or 10 minutes a day) even after the baby comes home. Consistency is important for dogs.

Once your dog knows and responds to it's commands, practice the sit-stay and down-stay as you practice "baby things"

If you don't want the dog in the nursery, it's time to start prohibiting access. Start by closing the door at night, or when you aren't home. Once the room is no longer part of the dog's territory, they won't be as upset at being excluded. Gradually start keeping her out of the room when you are in there – start with the door closed behind you, then work on a "boundary" when the door is open. Put the dog in a firm sit or down stay when you enter the room. If the dog crosses the boundary, gentle correct and return them to where they belong. If they respect the boundary and the stay, praise and reward their good behavior.

### **Baby Sights:**

- Use a realistic doll, cradling it, rock it, put it up on the changing table, into the bath, etc. During these activities, occasionally reward the dogs good behavior with petting, treats or praise.
- Show the doll, wrapped in blankets, to your dog. As they approach calmly, say, "gentle" and praise. If they rush at the "baby" give a verbal correction and start again.
- Allow the dog to investigate all new baby toys, furniture, etc
- Begin to introduce baby swings and all baby equipment Baby swings vibrate, make music and even rotate. These motions can trigger your dog's prey drive: they dog's inherit eagerness to chase and attack.

### **Baby Sounds:**

Because dogs 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. You can buy a CD created specifically for this at <http://preparingfido.com/> or download the sounds for free at <http://www.baby.mcshane.org/sounds/>

1. Start the sounds at a quiet level.
2. Play the sounds in every room of the house
3. As the dog gets used to the sounds, gradually increase the volume to what is typical for a crying baby.

### **Baby Smells**

About a month or so before the big day, start to sprinkle baby powder around the house to help your dog get used to this new smell. You might also want to start "borrowing" baby things from friends. Borrow baby blankets (unwashed) and let your dog get used to having them lying around. Now is the time to start preparing her not to lay on the baby blankets. If your dog starts to lay on a blanket use the "leave it" command with praise when the dog lays on her own place. You want the dog to avoid and blankets that may be hiding a baby in the near future

If your baby is born in a hospital, your dog will remain at home. You can use this interval to familiarize your dog with the baby's smell by bringing home blankets or clothing the baby has worn. (Diapers: Keep soiled diapers in a tightly closed container. One of the functions of a mother dog is to lick up the urine and feces of puppies to keep the sleeping area clean. Quite frequently, 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! This is not an abnormal behavior but a normal aspect of canine maternal behavior.)

### **Baby Movements:**

Usually when people are on the floor with their dogs, it's to wrestle and roughhouse with them. When you lie down, the dog jumps all over you. It's time to get your dog used to having you down at his level, because once the baby is there, you'll find yourself at your dog's level often. Because dog respect size and height, lowering yourself to their level can also lower their respect for you and your newborn. To keep this from happening, start getting your dog used to you lying on the floor – reading, working, moving around.

### **Real Babies**

Start introducing your dog to situations with real infants – in a controlled manner to ensure the infants safety - to real babies of friends or neighbors. This procedure should be considered only if the dog is reliably trained and controllable. The dog should gradually be exposed to babies until it can remain relaxed in their presence. This may require several sessions.

### **Dog's Instincts:**

Begin to desensitize your dog's prey drive: Start in short sessions (1 to 2 minutes) and work up. Doing too much too fast can be very stressful for your dog.

Stop playing tug and chase games with you dogs. You don't want to teach your dog to grab things from your hands and tug on them

Play games like "fetch" where you dog has to bring an object back to you, sit and stay until you throw it, then wait for a release command before chasing the object and bringing it back.

Start to desensitize your dog to any food and toy guarding behaviors.

Baby Swings/Prey Drive:

1. Allow the dog to smell and investigate the swing while it is in the OFF position.
2. Once in motion some dogs find the natural desire to chase hard to control around baby swings. Turn on the swing by itself and watch your dog's reaction. If your dog moves towards the swing to sniff, say "Leave it" in a strong voice. You may want to use a squirt bottle filled with water as an added "incentive" to leave the swing alone.
3. If the dog continues to "play" turn off the swing and put the dog in a sit or down stay. Turn the swing back on and praise the dog as long as the position is held.

Next, put the doll into the swing. Repeat the above steps.

### **Bringing Your Baby Home**

When coming home with the baby for the first time, it is important that the mother comes in the house first and greets the dog without the baby present. Remember, mom has been gone for a while and the dog will be excited to see her. This way, you can avoid reprimanding a dog that is excited and just wants to say hello.

Allow your dog to calm down and get used to the smells and sounds of the baby, which to it are the presence of another creature in the house. Later, when the level of excitement in the household has decreased and the dog appears relaxed, the baby and dog can be introduced to each other. One parent should attend to the baby and the other to the dog.

1. The dog should be in a sit or down stay on a leash.
2. Start from 10 to 15 feet away.
3. If the dog stays calm and under control, bring the baby closer to the dog, one step at a time.
4. As long as the dog is behaving, move closer, allowing the dog to sniff the baby, each time.

Err on the side of caution when determining when your dog is ready to approach your baby close enough to actually sniff the baby. Over a period of days, however, your dog should be allowed to sniff up close (Not in the face, but on the hand or foot is OK.) Licking is okay too. Again, lots of praise, keeping interaction positive and happy. After several introductions, and when it is clear that the dog is not going to nip or lunge at the baby, you can allow your dog off the leash near your infant. (This does not mean unsupervised visitation or that you should lay the child down for the dog to investigate it.)

### **The First Few Days**

It is common for a dog to “act up” after the arrival of a new baby. Many of these behaviors occur because there has been a change in your pack structure, and dogs are uncertain when things change.

### **The Long Haul**

Remember, your dog should not have unsupervised access to your baby - EVER. You will want to be especially careful when the baby is screaming, crying, or waving its arms and legs. These actions can elicit a predatory or play-leap reaction by the dog toward the infant. It is wiser to either put the dog in another room or put the dog in a down/stay several feet away from the baby.

Unfortunately, dogs frequently begin to "act up" after a new baby arrives. It is unclear whether these behaviors occur because of "jealousy" or simply because the dog is being deprived of its usual and expected amount of social attention and affection. You will want to start reducing the attention that you give your dog 2 or 3 months prior to the baby's arrival. This will help the dog accept that it is no longer the "focus" of your

attention. When the baby comes home, you should ensure that your dog gets sufficient attention.

One tip that can be helpful is that whenever you begin to do something with you baby, you can put the dog in a sit/stay and periodically reward it with a tidbit. This procedure allows the dog to associate pleasant experiences with the baby and gives the dog extra attention 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 could be fastened at the entrance to the child's room. This precaution allows you to hear the baby but eliminates your dog's access to the room.

Also, keep in mind when you take your infant to visit friends or relatives that the dogs encountered there may not be accustomed to an infant in their homes. Baby-sitters should be cautioned not to bring dogs with them to the home of an infant. Tragic incidents have occurred when adults mistakenly believed a dog was in the backyard or securely confined away from a baby. Dogs may push open doors and actively investigate the strange sounds and odors of an infant.

## **Conclusion**

As a new parent, although you should be aware of potential problems, you should not worry excessively about the potential problem of your dog injuring your infant. Most dogs adjust to new babies easily, quietly and without incident. If you are observant of your dog's behavior, and take precautions to introduce dog and baby to each other gradually while your dog is under control, you should be able to avoid accidents or troublesome incidents.

# **Canine College West**

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