

Introducing Your Baby and Pets

By Lori Jo Oswald

“Baby coming -- must get rid of pet.” This is the reason sometimes given by people who leave pets at the animal control shelter.

Most people who bring a baby home to a house with pets don't have any problems. In fact, a child and a pet can create their own special bond that lasts through the life of the pet. Here are some tips to help make sure that bond is strong from the moment you bring your infant home from the hospital.

Before Baby's Arrival

Before your baby arrives, you can prepare your pets, said Jennifer Cameron.

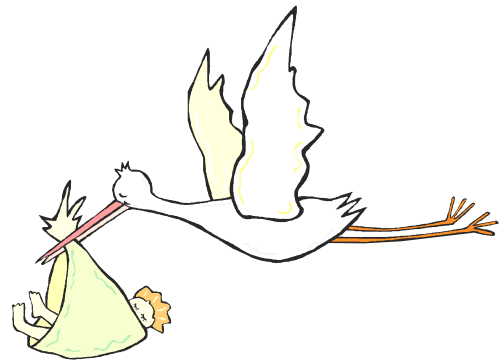
- If your dogs or cats have not been around children before, have your friends with children come by for brief visits to help your pets adjust to the sounds and activities of children.
- Let your pets investigate the baby's nursery.
- Before you bring your baby home from the hospital, bring a blanket that has the baby's smell on it home for the pets to investigate. “Leave this blanket around so your pet can adjust to the baby's scent,” Cameron said.
- Now might be a good time to take your pets to a veterinarian for their health check-up, to be sure vaccinations are up to date and to see if your pet is free of parasites.

The Big Day

On the big day, feed and exercise your pet before bringing home your baby. When you come in the door, both you and your spouse should greet the pet. Slowly introduce the pet. “Do not panic or pull the baby away when your pet approaches,” Cameron advised. “You could be sending the message that the baby is a threat. Keep this initial greeting short, then try to go on with normal activities.”

Even though your life has changed now, try to spend some time with your pet, playing and walking. “This will reassure your pet that they have not been ‘replaced’ in the household,” Cameron said. If you just don't have time, hire a dog-walker or pet-sitter to come help out.

Recognize that the pet has been with you longer, and that the baby represents a change, advises Dr. Hilary Petit of Wasilla Veterinary Clinic. “So the animal has to make an adjustment. Help the animal make the adjustment by not displacing them too much. If you can, include them in supervised interaction with the new infant so that they don't feel pushed out of the home. It is good to supervise them until they are comfortable.”



As Your Baby Grows...

Once your child starts crawling and walking, watch that she doesn't inadvertently hurt the animal through falling or grabbing. “A number of small animals are injured that way,” Dr. Petit said. “It's nobody's fault; it's a complete accident. Parents need to supervise more closely.”

If you see any signs of aggression or other behavioral problems, talk with your veterinarian or a dog trainer about the best ways to handle this. Dr. Petit said, “The child could be near the dog's dish or toys, and the dog could view that as a challenge. Some dogs will never act like that and some will.” If you know that your dog has behavioral problems, work with the dog before bringing the baby home. Dr. Petit

recommends using a baby doll to show the dog that “when I’m holding this baby, you have to sit,” for example. “Then the dog can understand what is asked of them.”

From the beginning, teach children to be kind to the family pets. “Praise your children for kind and gentle treatment of the pet,” Cameron said. “Correct them immediately for rough or inappropriate behavior. Do not allow your child to play with the pet while it is trying to eat or sleep.”

The American Animal Hospital Association says that to teach children to respect animals, “They should know that pets feel pain and get lonely when no one is around -- just like people do. Praise your children for gentleness and correct them for rough and unkind behaviors toward your pets. Children should also learn that dogs naturally chase, herd, catch, and fetch. Playfully grabbing a tail or running in the yard may be a dog's invitation to chase and jump—a very natural response for a dog.” Dr. Petit agrees. “Things that stumble, cry and run might encourage the dog’s instinctive desire to chase.”

Finally, remember, in many instances, your pets were your “babies” first, Cameron said. Let them share in this wonderful change to your family.

Whose Crib Is That? Cats and Babies Can Get Along Fine

By Lori Jo Oswald

Even an animal professional can be confused by the myths about children and pets, particularly when it comes to cats. A friend told me he took his cat to the vet recently, and the vet told him that because he had cats and a baby in the house, the baby was in danger.

Where does this fear about cats and babies come from? I certainly don’t see any problems in my house, where I have four cats -- and four dogs -- and a 10-month-old son who is fascinated by them and loves to pet them.

“You’re more likely to have damage done by a dog,” Dr. Hilary Petit of Wasilla Veterinary Clinic said. But she too says that the “legend” that cats will suck the breath out of a baby’s mouth has some people frightened. Perhaps a baby died of crib death a long time ago, and a cat was in the crib. Who knows where such stories begin? What is a concern is when people feel they have to abandon their pets because of such myths.



“Cats love warmth,” Dr. Petit said, “and babies are often in a warm, snuggly bed. It’s very common for cats to lie on top of people because they are warm. Also, cats are furry and long-coated.” In addition, newborn babies are usually not as heavy as cats or coordinated enough to push a cat off or away, so if you’re concerned about that, “just don’t let the cats sleep in the cradle with the baby,” Dr. Petit said, although she knows people who have.

When I mentioned what the veterinarian told my friend, Dr. Petit said that cats are territorial to a degree, and they may have some conflict with another cat, but not with humans. What parents

should keep in mind is that “cats are well-armed; they scratch and bite,” Dr. Petit said. “Parents need to be vigilant and teach the children not to pull their tails, squeeze, them, lay on them, or whack them. Teach children how to pet nicely,” she advised.”

There’s certainly a happy ending to my story. Clover, Bibs, and Sylvia, the cats I’ve had for 14 years, who had no experience with babies before, have all accepted Winston just fine, although Clover was a little surprised that the warm, soft crib was for him, not her. Now if only they could learn to get along with each other as well as they have with my baby.

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