



NEW BABY

GENERAL INFORMATION

Many people decide to give up their pet when a new baby enters the family. Some believe that animals pose a terrible risk to their newborn child. Animals and small children should not be left alone together without adult supervision, but with reasonable care, they can deeply enrich each other's lives. There are several simple techniques that can be employed to help a dog or cat adjust to the presence of a new baby.

A recent study reveals that children raised with animals are less likely to develop allergic reactions to animals, so that is an added bonus to having animals already in the house when the kids start arriving.

Animals and children do have a special relationship. They always want to tell you about their best friend, be it a dog, a cat, a guinea pig, or a goldfish. For many children, their pets are like siblings. They are always there, which can make a latchkey kid feel not so alone coming into an empty house after school.



PLANNING FOR A BABY IN A HOUSEHOLD WITH PETS

For pet parents, welcoming a baby into the family is exciting and stressful! You want your pet to still feel your unconditional love after the baby is home. Most pets accept a new baby with no problem. But, if you want to be extra careful, you can begin to prepare them ahead of time for the big event. The transition to a life with a baby and pets can be done smoothly.

Help your companion animal prepare for this blessed event by following these guidelines:

Before your baby arrives:

- Set up the nursery as soon as possible. Let your animal explore the room during this process. Consider placing a small battery-operated motion detector (sold at Radio Shack) in the crib to discourage him from claiming this cozy bed for his special napping spot. You can practice going into the nursery and reading aloud or talking in tones you will use with the baby.
- Make sure your pets are up-to-date with veterinary checkups and vaccinations, since you may not have time for such things in the first few months after the baby's birth. Give your pets plenty of special attention. Play with your cats and dogs on a regular basis; exercise helps them to relax, and it relieves stress for the whole family.
- Introduce your animal to the new scents that he will experience once the baby is home by using some of the powders, soaps and lotions you will be using on the baby.
- To get your animal used to the sights and sounds of the baby's room, invite friends with babies to visit. If that isn't possible, try to obtain an audio tape of a baby crying. Baby sounds may be the most frightening aspect of having a baby around for everyone. Try to desensitize him gradually to this aspect of baby's presence in the home.
- Gradually make changes to your house. For example, put up the bassinet, pack and play and swing about a month before your due date so your pet can get used to the new layout.
- At least one month before the baby's arrival, establish any necessary changes in your animal's routine. For example, since cats like to cuddle, it is not advisable to allow the cat in the newborn's room when the baby is sleeping, so now is the time to close the door and to teach your cat that it is off-limits.



- The night before coming home from the hospital, have someone bring a blanket or piece of clothing that the baby had used and put it on your pet's bedding. Our companion animals identify us primarily through the sense of smell, not sight.
- Plan out the timing of your pet's walks and decide who will walk with them. These things tend to slip through the cracks during the first few weeks after your baby's arrival!
- Designate an area where your baby can play and rest that is off-limits to your pet.

When your baby is home:

- When you walk in from the hospital, put the carrier down and greet your pet first. Let *them* decide when to come to the baby; don't force this on them.
- Mom should greet the animals while another person holds the baby, since a normal greeting from mom will help the animals feel that everything is okay. Mom can then hold out one of the baby's blankets for the animals to smell. Your dog should be held on a loose lead.
- When you enter the house, stay standing until the animals have had a chance to smell and listen to the baby. Ask your dog to sit or lay down before the person holding the baby sits down. Watch the animals closely. If your dog is curious, allow him to view the baby from about six feet away. Hold the lead loose, but short enough so that the dog can't reach the baby. Reward the dog with praise if he shows no fear or aggression. If your dog has been fine with other babies, you can allow him to go closer, but use caution.
- A screen door can be very helpful to keep cats and dogs away from the sleeping baby. The animals will learn to wait (probably at the door) for your return.
- Allow your pet to sniff the baby often.
- "Teach" the baby how to properly pet the cat or dog—it's best to start early on this one!
- Stick to your pet's routine as much as possible, including walks, favorite treats and outings. This means regular meal times and play sessions. These times together are so important. Don't wait until baby is asleep to play with your pet. If he gets praise and attention when baby is in the room, he will associate the new member of the family with good times, not competition for attention.
- Be patient, animals need time to adapt. If your animal's behavior is a little erratic at first, remember that in spite of all your careful preparations, this still is a big change for all members of the family. Eventually, everyone will settle in and your baby will grow up with the advantage of having the unconditional love and devotion of a companion animal. Your child may also be more empathetic, a quality he or she will carry into adulthood.



ADDITIONAL HELPFUL TIPS

- Purchase a tent top for the crib as added security so that a cat can't get into the crib to curl up with the baby.
- If you have a dog, consider taking him or her in for a training refresher course. Find a trainer who uses positive reinforcement. A trainer who has experience with babies and children is ideal, since he or she can design a training, exercise, and safety plan for your family. It will save you a lot of time and frustration when you are busy with the baby if your dog knows key cues, such as "drop it," "leave it," "wait," and "down/stay." Make sure you practice the cues daily with your dog.
- Watch your animals closely to see how they react. If your pets seem unduly frightened, you might want to seek help from a behaviorist; your veterinarian may be able to refer you to someone. Never, ever leave a baby or child unsupervised with the animals.
- Your animals may need reassurance that life hasn't changed all that much, so make sure you continue to give them special attention. Watch for signs of stress. Your dog may bark more; chase her tail, circle or pace; eliminate inappropriately; sulk or look depressed; start licking herself or chewing on herself incessantly; lose her appetite; or have diarrhea.
- Your cat may hide or seem shy; become grumpy, smacking people and other animals; eliminate inappropriately; sulk or look depressed; groom excessively, to the point of making bald spots or sores; lose his appetite; or have diarrhea. Any change in behavior can be a warning that your animal may need help adjusting. Consult with your veterinarian if you notice changes in your pet's behavior.



- When you start using a high chair to feed the baby, your cat or dog may try to share meals with the baby. Teach the animals that when the baby is eating, they don't get any tidbits. They will soon stop begging.
- Never give your dog a doll that looks like a real baby to play with. Young dogs that play rough need to practice being calm and gentle. You can help by giving your puppy a massage; sit on the floor with her and slowly rub her all over until she is so relaxed that she falls asleep. Try to restrict vigorous play to places the baby will not be crawling around in later (outside or in the garage).
- If you need to leave your baby with a sitter, tell the sitter to keep the animals and the baby apart in your absence. Don't take unnecessary risks with any of your family members – human or otherwise.
- There will be new challenges when the baby starts to crawl and then walk. You will soon have a very short person walking around the house with toys and food that may be very tempting (and accessible) to a dog. Once you have a toddler, it's even more important to practice your dog's cues every day. Your pets can sometimes be a big help – if your child isn't ready to calm down for a nap, try reading out loud to your dog or cat to create the appropriate restful atmosphere.
- Even if your animals are extremely tolerant, children need to be taught to be gentle with animals, since eventually they will be around someone else's pets who may not be so tolerant. Teaching kindness and respect for animals will bring greater benefit than simply avoiding getting bitten or scratched – it builds a better world for all of us. Remember, never leave a baby or child unattended around animals.

AS YOUR CHILD BEGINS TO GROW, HERE IS A ROUGH GUIDE TO WHAT'S APPROPRIATE AT WHAT AGE:

- Birth to six months: A quiet time for the animal/child interaction. No small child should be left unsupervised with an animal.
- Six months to a year: Keep pet food and feeding areas away from crawling and toddling children. A child of this age will grab at whatever is in his or her path, so ears and tails are a target, and children have to be carefully supervised around animals to avert any unexpected reactions.
- 1-3 years: A time of exploration and for putting things in the mouth. A dog or cat who is possessive about his or her toys and food can be potentially dangerous to a child. The child is eye level with a medium to large dog, and dogs can see that as a threat. This age group is especially vulnerable to a biting dog.
- 4-6 years: By now, a child has mastered quite a lot of language and can understand more about how to interact with another living being, but a firm eye on the situation is still needed.
- 6-10 years: Your child can now help look after a pet – feeding, cleaning up, walking, and playing with a cat or dog or any other animal in the house.
- Teens: At some point in the teen years, your child may develop other priorities in his or her life, such as sports, band, boys, girls, existential philosophy, or shopping. Pet-care chores can suddenly and dramatically go onto the back burner. Parental supervision is a must.
- 18-20 years: Many kids will be going away to college or joining the military. You need to be ready for the likelihood that taking care of the animals will revert back to the adults or other children in the family.



Further Reading: American Humane's "[Pet Meets Baby](#)" booklet