



Introducing Your Dog to a New Baby

When anticipating the arrival of a new baby, special care must be taken to prepare the family dog – or dogs – for the big changes to come. Planning ahead and taking precautions are key in making the transition a smooth one for everyone involved.

It has been said, “A dog doesn’t know how to be a person; he only knows how to be a dog.” This bears repeating when discussing dog-baby relations. For every romantic memory (or fantasy!) about a dog “baby-sitting” a child for hours, there are many more about difficult – even tragic – consequences of improper supervision. Dogs don’t know how to interact with babies, and some may not even know what a baby is. They may accidentally hurt an infant by jumping on the owner (with the baby in her arms) or becoming aroused by loud screaming and flailing arms. A dog who gets along with small children will not necessarily recognize a baby as a *smaller* child, and could even view him as prey. It is best, therefore, to assume your dog will react unpredictably toward your new baby and plan accordingly.

How to plan?

1. Start training now. If you haven’t already done so, enroll your dog in obedience training. A positive, pain-free training class will teach you how to control your dog’s behavior without causing stress or unpleasant associations with you or your baby.
2. Once your dog can perform the basics (Sit, Down, Stay, Come, etc.), practice them while doing soon-to-be familiar baby tasks: practice a Down-Stay while cradling a doll and walking it back and forth. Pat the doll’s back as though burping it, sit back down, and so on. Reward your dog with treats for staying in the desired position. Practicing with a talking doll (some come with a crying track) can further simulate a real infant.
3. If possible, begin to expose your dog to real babies, perhaps of friends or extended family. Do not let the dog approach the baby: simply reward him for calm behavior in the presence of this brand new creature. **If the dog shows discomfort (growling, barking, etc.), do not punish him:** this doesn’t teach him that “aggression is bad”, but that babies are bad news. Calmly remove him and repeat the exercise at a later time and at greater distance from the baby.
4. Begin to introduce your dog – slowly – to the sounds of a new baby. Recorded baby sounds (gurgles, babbling, crying) can be played at extremely low volume while feeding the dog treats. With each session, increase the volume a little bit. The goal is to have the dog still appear relaxed even in the presence of loud crying. (Who wants to deal with a barking dog *and* a screaming baby during 2:00a.m. diaper changes??)
5. If your new baby is born at a hospital, consider bringing home blankets he/she has worn to begin to familiarize your dog with the new scent.

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When the baby comes home:

1. Plan to have one person handle the dog while another handles the baby. It is too risky and exhausting to ask one person to do both, and could result in injury to the baby.
2. Head halters (such as the Gentle Leader) are highly recommended for humanely controlling excited dogs. They can prevent the dog jumping at the baby or simply moving too quickly toward her. Let the dog see the baby from 20 feet away, reward for calm behavior, then leave the room. Repeat from 15 feet away, 10 feet away, and so on.
3. Use caution when allowing your dog to approach the baby. Keep the dog on leash and watch for any signs of trouble: staring at the baby with a stiff body and closed mouth, high-pitched whining, or sudden lunges. If you are not sure what to look for, hire a trainer to come to your house and assist you with this stage.
4. If you cannot supervise your dog around your baby, confine the dog in a safe area; ideally, this would be a crate in another room. If small children are visiting, lock the door to this safe-room so no one lets the dog out without your knowledge. Pay special attention when the baby is crying, screaming, wiggling and flailing arms and legs, as this can provoke a predatory reaction in some dogs. Some parents opt to install a sturdy baby gate at the nursery door to keep the dog out; others shut the door and keep a baby monitor running in the nursery so they can hear any activity when the baby wakes up.

Make sure to schedule time and exercise for your dog to prevent “garden variety” behavior problems from developing: barking, digging, chewing, hyperactivity and so on. A dog’s needs don’t stop just because a new family member has come home!

Without question, it takes time and effort to prepare a dog for a baby, but it is time and energy well spent. Planning ahead and erring on the side of caution can help everyone live a long and happy life together.