How to introduce your new baby to pets

Pet dogs are important family members in many American households, but new parents worry about how the family dog will take to a new baby — especially if the dog has not been exposed to infants before. Following these guidelines will help assure that the relationship between your new baby and your pet will be safe and loving.

Know your dog. Most dogs are curious about infants, especially if they've never seen one before. Dogs probably do not view infants as human beings, but simply as a curiosity; they usually don't show signs of aggression. You should be concerned, however, if the dog has previously shown aggressive tendencies toward infants or adults, or if the dog has shown predatory behavior, such as chasing and killing other animals. If your dog has shown these traits, consult an animal behavior specialist for advice and keep the dog separated from the baby.

Teach your dog basic commands. By the time the baby is born, the dog should sit and lie reliably on command and remain in that position no matter what else is happening. These commands should not be associated with punishment, because they will eventually be used when the dog is near the baby. Instead of punishment, reinforce the behavior you want with positive rewards such as praise or a treat.

Role-play with the dog. Once your dog can consistently remain seated, you can simulate activities you will perform with the baby. With the dog in a sit/stay position, carry a doll wrapped in blankets, rock the doll, and let the dog look at the doll while in the sit/stay position. Reward the dog for staying still. Avoid punishment, but use a firm No when necessary.

Allow the dog to sniff items the baby has touched. Before the baby comes home, present the dog with a blanket, clothing, or a dirty diaper the baby has worn. The dog will become familiar with the baby's odor and be less curious when the baby appears.

Provide a quiet, controlled introduction. Allow the dog to greet you first, without the baby. Then, when the dog has calmed down and the baby is quiet, command the dog to sit and show the baby to the dog. Depending on how hyper your dog is, you may need to have the dog on a leash at this point. Reward the dog with praise and petting for appropriate behavior. A dog can smell the baby from several feet away; if you're not comfortable about letting the dog sniff the baby closely, it's not necessary at this point.

Supervise at all times. After the introductions are made, the next step is to allow the dog to wander loose. But the dog should never have access to the baby in an unsupervised setting. Although most dogs adapt quickly to the presence of a baby in the household, it's safest to assume that an adverse reaction could occur and to supervise all interactions between the dog and baby.

Generally, know that mutts and mixed breeds tend to have a smoother temperament than pure breeds. Statistically, German Shepherds are the breed with the highest attack rates on children. Because of horrible past incidences, we feel strongly that no child should ever be anywhere around a pit bull.

Cats are generally not a problem, although they might be full of curiosity. While there is no truth to the old wives' tale that 'a cat will steal a baby's breath', we prefer that you not allow the cat to sleep in the child's bedroom.

Birds and reptiles, such as snakes, lizards, turtles and other exotic pets tend to carry germs that can cause severe gastrointestinal diseases. Since you are now a parent, it may be time to move on with your life and switch over to more realistic pet options.

Interestingly enough, new research indicates that the rate of allergies to pets in children is actually decreased by early exposure in infancy. But this may not be the case with everyone, so be watchful for the development of allergy symptoms.

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