

Is your four legged baby ready for your new baby? Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

Your dog is your baby. She goes on vacation with you, you spare no expense for her healthcare or well being. She sleeps on your bed, and lies under the table during meals. She is a part of everything that you do. She is family, no doubt. But, there is a new member of the family coming—a two legged member. This is unknown territory for you much less your dog. How can you make sure that your dog feels loved and continues to have a high quality of life while you take care of your new baby? Will your dog hurt your child? Does your dog need special skills to live with a child? What can you do to prepare your dog for your baby's birth? Can your child have as good a relationship with your dog as you do? Read on for answers to your questions and some peace of mind.

Safety is a big concern for many parents. If your pet has shown aggression, even it was toward a stranger, seek help early on in your pregnancy from a board certified veterinary behaviorist. You can find one at www.dacvb.org. Don't assume that your pet will automatically love your child as much as he loves you. Put safety precautions into use early on so that by the time the baby comes, they will be habitual for both you and your dog.

As a parent, you should know that children are more frequently bitten than any other group of people in the United States. What may surprise you is that children are most often bitten by a dog that they know such as their own or an extended family member's dog. That's right, the most common group of dogs that bite children are familiar dogs, not the stray dog on the street. Any dog can harm a child, either accidentally or in response to some interaction initiated by the child. Children, particularly when they are young, behave unpredictably. They make sudden loud noises and rapid movements. A dog that has never shown evidence of aggression before may react with a growl, snarl, snap, or bite. These behaviors are a normal way for dogs to communicate to each other that they want to increase their personal space, but they will not necessarily be interpreted correctly by a child. In addition, a dog that is otherwise friendly to children may be startled or excited by something else, knocking the child over, or may injure a child during an exuberant greeting or play session. For these reasons, children can never be left unsupervised with any dog. Adult supervision is extremely important for both the dog's and the child's safety.

When your baby gets older, he will have responsibilities as well. Starting at the point where babies start crawling, they can begin to understand limitations. You can use sign language as well as verbal communication to let your child know that certain interactions are unacceptable. Chasing, hitting, pulling, riding and stepping on dogs are never acceptable. Is that the way that you treated your dog before your baby came? Would you have allowed a visitor to your home to pull your dog's ears? No! So, it can't be allowed now. Your child can and must learn boundaries for your dog to have a good quality of life. Just as your dog had to learn that he would sometimes be excluded from activities in the baby's room, your child should learn that certain areas are the dog's and

not hers. This is extremely important for keeping kids safe as kids are often bitten when dogs are cornered on their beds, under tables, or in crates.

Just as you spent time reading about being a parent during pregnancy, your dog needs an education so that the adjustment will be seamless. Start to prepare your dog as soon as you know that you are pregnant. If you have been a slacker when it comes to training your dog, pick up the pace now. Nine months seems like a long time, but when you spend three months with morning sickness and the last one unable to bend down, you end up with less time than you think! To begin with, make sure that your dog has basic obedience, which for most dogs can be achieved through a positive reinforcement training class. In addition to a good foundation, your dog needs the following skills: *leave it*, *sit*, *down*, *stay* and *go to your bed*.

Necessary skills: Leave it Sit Down Go to your bed Stay
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The *leave it* cue is useful in encouraging your dog to drop the baby's toys or walk away from a dropped baby bottle, for example. *Sit*, *down* and *stay* can be used in everyday life numerous times to keep your dog from jumping on you, your baby and visitors. *Go to your bed* (or crate) allows you to send your dog away from a situation that she shouldn't be involved in. For example, if you are feeding the baby, you may not want your dog to be in your lap. *Go to your bed* allows you to send your dog to a comfortable spot when you are trying to quiet your screaming baby and your dog is underfoot.

Make any changes to your dog's schedule and environment as soon as possible. If you have already designated a certain room as your child's room, put a baby gate in that area early on so that your dog can get used to being excluded when necessary. If you can, set up as many of the baby's things (e.g., crib, other furniture, bouncy seat, swing) so that your dog can get used to seeing and hearing them. Purchase an inexpensive umbrella stroller and begin to work on walking with your dog and the stroller. To make it more realistic, you can put a doll in the stroller when you take your practice walks. Your neighbors will think that you are crazy, but your dog will thank you later!

Teach your dog that you will look different and that interactions with you will be different as well. If your dog is allowed to sit on your lap at will, teach him to sit and be invited up before sitting with you. He will still be allowed to close to you in this way, but he has to be polite about it. This will keep her from jumping on top of the baby when he is in your lap. In addition, it will help him to know how to interact with you and to get what he wants from you. This will help alleviate the anxiety which will come with such huge changes to his life. If you plan to wear your baby (which I highly recommend!) in a baby carrier or sling, start practicing your dog's obedience exercises while you are carrying a baby doll in the sling.

Get your dog used to what it sounds like to live with a baby by purchasing a CD of baby sounds. See the resources list at the end of this article for suggestions. If your partner will be feeding the dog or walking the dog instead of you, make those changes now so

that your dog can adjust to the change in schedule and interaction. If you will be cosleeping with your baby and you don't feel comfortable having your dog in bed with you, make that change now, not when the baby comes.

Before you come home from the hospital, send home an item of the baby's clothes for your pet to smell. Some parents board their dogs or send them to stay with a relative until Mommy and baby are settled in the house. This way, the conflict that can occur at the door when Mommy comes home is avoided. When Mommy and baby first come home from the hospital, someone else should hold the baby so that Mommy can greet the dog. She will have missed you and will be excited to see you. Greet your pet as you normally would so that he can express how much he missed you. Avoid putting the baby in her face. This can be perceived as a threat to the dog. We want to start this relationship off right. Would you like a baby put one inch under your nose?

Does your dog have any medical problems that you have been putting off evaluating or addressing? Now is the time to bring your pet to the veterinarian's office for a full check up or a discussion about a previously diagnosed problem which has yet to be treated. After the baby comes, you will have a lot less time. Your dog deserves this time to ensure that he is not inadvertently forgotten later.

When the house has settled down, set aside special time for you and your dog. Even if it is 5 minutes a day to be together without any distractions, that is better than nothing. Do something fun like playing with her favorite toy or going for a walk. You can teach her cool tricks which can maximize your quality time. For example, teach her to hold things in her mouth so that she can help you do the laundry or carry the mail in from the mailbox while the baby is sleeping. Simple tasks like this keep her life rich and allow her to interact with you, keeping your relationship strong.

Every child should have a dog. Dogs touch us in ways that no person can. They teach children responsibility in the absence of judgment. They evoke unconditional love. Your child and your dog can be best friends with a little bit of preparation and precaution.

Resources

http://www2.the-kennel-club.org.uk/safe_and_sound.html

www.livingwithkidsanddogs.com

<http://www.thebluedog.org/>

Preparing Fido CD of baby sounds

For more information about Florida Veterinary Behavior Service to www.flvetbehavior.com or contact Dr. Radosta's office by phone (561-795-9398) or email (info@flvetbehavior.com).