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Bringing Home Baby

It is hard to predict how a pet will react to a new arrival. Expectant parents should start preparing the household and the pets long before the big day arrives. This will help ease the transition when going from a house with no children to a house with children. Give your pets the best chance possible to adapt with success and your family will grow in the right direction.

The importance of obedience

It is important that your dog learns that it is not okay to jump on people who are standing or sitting. It may have been frowned upon before when your pants got muddy, but now there will be an infant in people's arms or laps that needs to be protected. It is imperative that your dog can calmly "sit," "stay" or "lay down" and this can be reinforced with rewards such as petting or treats. Consider obedience school if it has been awhile or if certain skills were never mastered as now, more than ever, you want your dog to be a polite member of your family. Many classes run 6-8 weeks in length so plan ahead! Cats also need to learn not to jump in your lap without an invitation. Teach them by standing up when they jump in your lap on their own. Try using a treat while teaching your cat to jump up on command so that they learn that an invitation is necessary.

Prepare for all the changes

When you bring home a baby you are also bringing home new furniture, strollers, swings, noisy toys, and new loud sounds. Start exposing your pets to these long before the due date so that all of these stressful and possibly scary additions aren't overwhelming for your pets. Some dogs will try and nip at wheels or chase strollers. If you plan on walking your dog with your baby get them used to the stroller while it is still empty. If your dog is scared or wants to nip the wheels then go slow with your dog on a leash. When your can dog walk without reacting then give a food reward and praise. Work up to your regular pace. If your dog is unable to get over the fear or desire to nip the wheels schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for more help.

The cries of a baby may be startling to some animals. Play recordings of baby sounds to help desensitize your pets. Test your pet's reaction by playing the recordings at normal volume first. Watch for signs that your pet is fearful, aroused, is anxious or has aggression. If so, begin desensitization by playing the sounds low enough that your pet does not react. While the sounds are playing, use positive reinforcement by doing things such as giving treats, feeding a meal, petting, or brushing. Over several sessions increase the volume until your pet does not react when the sounds are at a normal level. You can also walk your dog to the nearby playground and spend time just sitting in the vicinity watching the children and hearing the noises. Small children will run, scream, laugh and cry and some dogs need time to adjust to these behaviors. Praise or pet your dog while he sits and watches.

Sleepy time

Your pet must not be allowed to share a bed with the baby. Put together the nursery in advance so that your pets are not alarmed by all the furniture moving and possibly loud noises from building. You will need to decide if you will allow your pet in the nursery. If the answer is no, then begin training your pets to stay out, which may be hard in the beginning when they know that you are in there. It is better to start before there is a baby in there, too. Pets should learn to sleep away from the bed before the baby arrives. Dogs can be kept separate with a baby gate or by putting them in a crate or a small room at night. Cats can be confined to a separate room or merely shut the bedroom door. A crib tent (netting that stretches over crib) can be used to keep the cats out of the crib when it is unoccupied. A screen door on the nursery may be a solution if you need to hear your baby without the cat going in there and don't want to rely on just a monitor.

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Here kitty, kitty

It is a good idea to move things like the litter box, food and water dishes to out of the way areas such as a basement, closet, or laundry room. As your little one begins exploring these may all be too tempting to resist. Some people switch to a covered litter box, but not all cats will use these and you should try switching it before the baby is born. Making changes before baby comes (such as litter box type or location) will make easier to know if any problems (like not using the litter box) are because your cat is upset by the changes or the arrival of the baby. There are baby/pet gates available that will block a room off from your child but have a cat size door that you can open to allow access for your cat for food and the litter box. Shop around for a cat tree or window perches or beds to place on higher furniture to give your cat the opportunity to watch the family but get away from a rambunctious toddler.

Welcome home

Your pets will be very excited to see you, especially if it has been a few days. You should come in empty handed to allow them the chance to greet and sniff you and hopefully calm down. There should be two adults present when your pet is first introduced to the baby. Dogs should be on a leash for faster control. Don't force an interaction, but rather let your pet set the pace. Your pet can sniff the baby, but if your dog gets too excited or tries to lick the baby then distract your dog with a favorite toy or a trip outside. If your dog seems scared or anxious (tucked tail, flat ears), rowdy, or aggressive then the adult supervising the dog should calmly pick up the leash and walk the dog away. Occasionally a dog will see a new baby as prey and this is a very serious situation. If your dog displays body language such as focusing intently on your baby and has a stiff body or erect tail when the baby is seen then it is very important to keep your dog separate from your baby until they recognize that it is a person, too. Try brief interactions and separate immediately once these behaviors are noted. Contact your veterinarian if you have any concerns about the behaviors you are seeing.

Separation is okay

Dogs will learn that they cannot always be right next to you. A dog should NEVER be left alone with a baby. Knowing this, you will either need to have the baby with you at all times or set up barriers so that your baby can enjoy a swing or a bouncy seat while you move around the house. Invest in baby gates to keep your baby on one side and your pet on the other. Reward your dog when it is behaving well while being separated. You can try toys that require your dog to work a little to get a treat out to occupy him when on the other side of the gate. You can also give verbal praise, pets, or toss treats over. Your dog should also be kept separate from your baby in the car. This may require using a travel carrier, a barrier, or a seat belt for your dog. Plan ahead for when your baby becomes more mobile and think about additional baby gates to give your pet a place to take a break. If your pet has any food aggression then they should always be fed on the other side of a barrier (including bones, rawhides, and treats). Feeling that your baby is safe in your home is crucial to your family. Pets that have multiple behavior problems such as aggression, fear, or separation anxiety may require a lot of work. There are times where it is not reasonable to manage the supervision or separation that is required to keep your baby safe and your pet comfortable. Contact your veterinarian with your concerns as other forms of help may be available.

By taking little steps early and being aware of your individual pet's personality you can give your pet the best chance to succeed. This can lead to a strong bond between your pets and children for years to come!

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