



“Introducing Your Pet and New Baby”

by
Mariana Baserga, M.D.

Originally published in the Good Beginnings newsletter, “Beginnings Buzz-z-z-z-z”
Vol. V, No. 2 – Summer 2002

Congratulations, you're bringing home your baby! If your family already includes a pet, you'll need to help that first "baby" adjust to the new one you'll soon bring home. By following the tips below you can ensure that your pet stays where she belongs-with you and your growing family-and minimize any risks for your new baby.

How Will My Pet React?

No matter how much you plan ahead, the addition of a new family member may be difficult for your pet. Remember, your dog or cat was your first "baby" and is used to being the center of your attention. So it's understandable that she may experience something akin to sibling rivalry when you introduce a new baby into your household. You can minimize this feeling by working with her before you bring home your baby. For example, because your new baby will demand a lot of your time and energy, gradually accustom your pet to spending less time with you. Drastically decreasing attention and frequently scolding, ignoring, or isolating your pet after the baby comes home will likely make your pet feel stressed. If your pet is particularly attached to the mother-to be, another family member should develop a closer relationship with the animal. That way, the pet can still feel loved and provided for while mom is busy with the baby.

How Can I Prepare My Pet and my house?

Below are several suggestions to make introducing your pet and baby safer and smoother for all. When possible, carry out these changes before the baby's arrival to best prepare your pet.

- 1) Take your pet to the veterinarian for a routine health exam and necessary vaccinations.
- 2) Spay or neuter your pet. Not only do sterilized pets typically have fewer health problems associated with their reproductive systems, but they are also calmer and less likely to bite.
- 3) Consult with a veterinarian and pediatrician if the thought of your newborn interacting with the family pet makes you uncomfortable. By working with these experts before your baby is expected home, you can resolve problems early and put your mind at ease.
- 4) Address any pet training and behavior problems. If your pet exhibits fear and anxiety, now is the time to get help from an animal behavior specialist.
- 5) If your pet's behavior includes gentle nibbling, pouncing, or swatting at you and others, redirect that behavior to appropriate objects.
- 6) Get your pet used to nail trims.

7) Train your pet to remain calmly on the floor beside you until you invite him on your lap, which will soon cradle a newborn.

8) Consider enrolling in a training class with your dog, and practice training techniques. Training allows you to safely and humanely control your dog's behavior and enhances the bond between you and your pet.

9) Encourage friends with infants to visit your home to accustom your pet to babies. Supervise all pet and infant interactions.

10) Accustom your pet to baby-related noises months before the baby is expected. For example, play recordings of a baby crying, turn on the mechanical infant swing, and use the rocking chair.

11) To discourage your pet from jumping on the baby's crib and changing table, apply double-stick tape to the furniture.

12) If the baby's room will be off-limits to your pet, install a sturdy barrier such as a removable gate (available at pet or baby supply stores) or, for jumpers, even a screen door. Because these barriers still allow your pet to see and hear what's happening in the room, he'll feel less isolated from the family and more comfortable with the new baby noises.

13) Use a baby doll to help your pet get used to the real thing. Carry around a swaddled baby doll, take the doll in the stroller when you walk your dog, and use the doll to get your pet used to routine baby activities, such as bathing and diaper changing.

14) Sprinkle baby powder or baby oil on your skin so your pet becomes familiar with the new smells.

15) Finally, plan ahead to make sure your pet gets proper care while you're at the birthing center or spending time at the NICU.

16) It would be advisable to keep pets outside the baby's room if your infant was born prematurely and/or has reactive airway disease or chronic lung disease. Also, having carpets washed before bringing the baby home is a good idea since this will reduce the amount of house dust levels.

With proper training, supervision, and adjustments, you, your new baby, and your pet should be able to live together safely and happily as one (now larger) family.

Mariana Baserga, M.D., completed her neonatal fellowship at Cedars-Sinai NICU in June 2002, and is now at Children's Hospital, Orange County.