

Pawsitive Results Critter Academy

Where people learn to lead...and pets love to follow!

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Preparing Your Pet for a New Baby

Helping your pet adjust to the arrival of a new baby can seem like an overwhelming task. You've got your hands full preparing yourself and your home! Your pet will adjust best if changes are gradually made to the household before the baby arrives. Ask yourself the following questions to help determine where you need to focus your efforts:

- 1) **What are your pet's "sensitivities"?** Make a list of any things that make your pet uncomfortable, cautious, fearful or aggressive. For each thing, list what your pet does in that situation (hides, shakes, growls, bites, becomes vocal, stops using the litterbox). Put a star next to things that are likely to happen more often when the baby comes home. Consider all possible sights, sounds, smells, visitors, etc. These starred items need to be addressed, ideally well before your baby arrives. Some ways to address issues:
 - ◆ If your pet is sensitive to sounds, make a tape recording of various baby sounds. Play the tape with the volume very low while you spend time with your pet doing his favorite things. As long as he remains calm, gradually increase the volume over time until your pet is relaxed while the tape plays at full volume.
 - ◆ If your pet is sensitive to smells, introduce the baby care items with all of their new smells into your household before the baby arrives.
 - ◆ If your pet isn't used to frequent guests, start to have people over before the baby arrives. Keep interactions with guests at whatever level your pet feels comfortable, and provide your pet with a special treat or toy while guests are there so he will develop a positive association with company. If you have a dog, spend time practicing her obedience when company is over so she learns to be well-behaved around guests.
- 2) **What are your sensitivities?** Are there things your pet does that annoy you? Are there things that aren't a big deal now but will be a huge deal if you are busy with the baby, the baby is napping, or you are sleep-deprived? Deal with these things now!
- 3) **Are there gaps in your dog's obedience training?** Now is the time to brush up on obedience and even introduce new skills. Some helpful obedience skills are: loose leash walking (with a stroller!), coming when called, and drop it. Use positive reinforcement training with your dog so he will be a happy and willing partner.

- 4) **What will change in your pet's routine?** Animals are most relaxed when they know what to expect. Will you need to: move your pet's bed, cage or litterbox; change feeding, play, cuddle or walk times; leave your pet alone more, or close off rooms that were previously available to him? Gradually making these changes before the baby arrives will maximize your pet's chances of accepting them. There also may be ways you can minimize changes in your pet's routine or replace current activities with new ones. For example, could you hire a dog walker or take your dog to day care to insure adequate exercise, or feed your pet out of "busy toys" to keep him occupied while you care for the baby? Can you find games to play with your pet that you can do while caring for your baby, such as playing fetch or playing with a "fishing pole"-type toy? Again, introduce these new activities before the baby arrives. Practice going through your daily routine with your pet while carrying a newborn-sized doll weighted to 10 pounds- you'll see if your pet behaves differently when you're arms are full of baby, and your pet will have a chance to get used to it.

If your pet has ever shown aggression to any person for any reason, plays rough, has had bad experiences with children, or is "protective" of any family members, then you should call for a behavior evaluation right away- the sooner the problems are addressed, the better our chances of a successful resolution!

After the Baby Arrives

When you arrive home, greet your pet without the baby at first. Wait until he has settled down from the euphoria of seeing you again before having him meet the newest family member. When you are ready to make introductions, have someone holding your dog on leash. Parrots should first meet a baby from inside their cage, and cats will generally approach on their own when they are ready to meet. You can allow your dog or cat to smell the baby if he is calm and curious, but do not put your baby's face in your pet's face or force your pet to meet the baby if he is nervous. Parrots can sit with a person that is next to the baby, but be careful about having the parrot get closer if he uses his beak to balance himself or investigate new things. Of course, any pet with a history of aggression should be introduced to your baby only under the direction of an experienced behavior consultant. The most important thing is to reward your pet for calm behavior around the baby- this will both encourage good behavior and help to make a positive association with the presence of the baby.

As your baby becomes mobile, make sure you have a safe place for your pet to retreat when he needs some quiet time. Do not leave babies or children alone with any pet, no matter how well they seem to get along. Babies tend to grab and pull, and your pet should not be expected to "know better" than to react to this pain. Unfortunately, the methods animals use to express their displeasure can hurt a baby, even if the "correction" was meant to be gentle.

Living happily with babies and pets can certainly take some work, but it can be worth the effort! If your pet feels safe and secure and his needs for exercise and attention are being met, then he can continue to be a great companion. Over time, your pet can become a great companion and playmate for your child as well. The key is supervising interactions so that you can keep them appropriate and rewarding for everyone involved.