

## CHILDREN AND PETS

The birth of a baby or adoption of a new child is associated with a great deal of anxiety, excitement and stress not only for the family, but also the family pet. Some dogs and cats will have a different time adjusting to these changes, especially if this is your first child, but preparation and planning will help.

### How is my pet likely to respond to the new arrival?

This will depend a lot on the pet's previous experience with children. Here are some things to consider:

- If there has been previous aggression or fear with children, it may be necessary to consult with a veterinary behaviourist
- If there has been little or no exposure to young children or babies, there may be some initial anxiety or associated with the sights, sounds, and odors of the new child.
- Keeping all introductions positive will help get the relationship between your pet and your new child off to a good start.
- As your child learns to roll, crawl, and walk, some pets may have trouble adapting to one or more of these changes. Fear, dominance challenges, possessive displays, and playful behaviors could result in aggression. Anxiety or fear could lead to anorexia, compulsive disorders or destructiveness.

### What can we do to prepare for the new arrival?

Behavior problems may not develop directly from the arrival of the child, but rather from the changes in the household, associated with the new arrival.

- Consider any changes that you may need to make in the pet's schedule, housing, play, exercise or attention, so that adjustments can begin to be made well before the baby's arrival.
- Set up the nursery in advance
- If the pet is to be kept out of the room, access should be denied before the child's arrival.
- If your pet is to continue to enter the room when supervised, begin to accompany your pet into the nursery, so that it can adapt to the new odors and new setup. The pet should be allowed to investigate the baby's room, blankets, and new furniture, and praised or given a small food treat so that it can develop a positive association with each of these new cues.

### For Dog Owners

For dogs, reviewing or upgrading obedience skills is essential so that you can safely and effectively control your dog in all situations. Any existing behavior problems should be resolved before the arrival of your baby.

- Practice new activities associated with child care in front of pets so that they can be familiar with them. Tape recordings or videos of babies crying, holding a doll wrapped in a blanket, taking your dog for a walk beside a stroller or baby carriage, or even going through the motions of changing a diaper will simulate some of the experiences to which your pet will soon be exposed. By providing a favored chew toy, giving a food reward, or providing extra affection during these activities, your pet may actually learn to enjoy these new stimuli.
- Enlist the help of some friends or relatives with young children. Dogs can be taken for a walk while a child is rolled in the stroller or carriage. A baby can be carried around the home or nursed in the presence of the dog and children should be encouraged to play in the opposite end of a room or yard from where the dog is situated. The dog must be well controlled, preferably with a leash and head halter, and given food rewards and/or play to keep the association positive. A wire-meshed muzzle could also be applied to ensure additional safety, especially when being exposed to new situations. By the end of the visit it may even be possible to let the dog interact with the child, but only if it remains friendly and shows no fear or anxiety.

### For Cat Owners

Obtaining new furniture, altering the cat's feeding, sleeping, elimination of play areas, and trying to keep the cat out of certain locations such as the crib, should be considered before the arrival of the baby.

- To reduce the chances of the cat marking the new furniture, the first few introductions to the new areas should be well supervised. Once your cat has investigated and rubbed against the new furniture, spraying is far less likely.
- When the crib or cradle is first set up, the cat may wish to mark the area, or investigate, or even to sleep in the crib. Booby trapping areas or using a water gun can teach the cat to stay away from the areas of concern, well before the baby arrives.

### What should be done when the baby arrives?

- Bring home a blanket or clothing item that has the baby's scent on it to introduce the scent to your pet.
- Consider having the first introduction occur outside the family home.
- Progress gradually, avoid any situations that might lead to fear, anxiety or discomfort in the baby's presence and make all associations and experiences in the baby's presence positive.
- Maintain or even increase the amount and type of training, exercise and play.
- Keep your pet's nails well trimmed.
- Supervise all interactions between the pet and baby.
- Keep the pet out of the baby's room during nap and sleeping times.
- Ensure that your dog is well controlled and responsive to obedience training commands. For some dogs, leaving a leash attached (preferably to a head collar) is a useful way to ensure additional control.
- Reward the pet for obedient and relaxed behavior in the presence of the child.
- Every effort should be made to allow the pet into the room for food, play or affection when the baby is present. Feed the pet when the baby is being fed, or have another family member occupy the pet during that time.
- Take your dog outdoors for play or a walk when you are taking the child out. The goal is to teach the pet that positive or 'good things' are most likely to happen in the presence of the child.

### What should be done if aggression arises?

Such behavior is very upsetting, regardless of its reasons. An immediate decision on whether to keep and work with the pet, or remove it from the house must be made. Although some cases may be treated quickly and safely, most cases require extensive precautions to prevent injuries and include a great deal of time, effort and commitment.

Regardless of the reason for aggression, biting dogs should be leashed (attached to the owner) preferably with a head collar, muzzled, and closely supervised or crated in the presence of small children. Aggressive cats should be confined away from small children except when they are in a carrier, on a leash and harness, or well supervised and either calm or otherwise occupied with food or toys.

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