



Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival

Helping your pet adjust to the arrival of a new baby is much like preparing a young child for the same event. Handling your pet's curiosity, anxiety and increased insistence for attention may seem like an overwhelming task, in addition to preparing yourself and your household for the baby's arrival. You can, however, help your pet prepare for the big changes ahead with minimal time and effort by making gradual adjustments to your lifestyle before the baby arrives.

Sounds And Smells

Your pet is very sensitive to sounds and smells and uses these special abilities to gather information. From your pet's point of view, you and your home have specific identifying smells that are uniquely yours. There are also certain sounds that your pet considers "normal" for your household. Even the different tones of voice you use send important signals. Your baby won't actually change those scents and sounds that are part of your identity, but the baby's arrival will certainly add some new and very different ones. It's important that you introduce these new smells and sounds to your pet gradually in a calm and pleasant atmosphere.

Each time you introduce something new to your pet, make the experiences positive. Stroke him, give him treats and praise him for his good behavior when he's faced with a strange new sound or smell. Relax! If you act anxious, your pet will be anxious too.

Pets tend to feel alarmed and defensive when faced with unexpected sounds. Take a little time to become familiar with the "normal" sounds of your household. Is your home normally quiet, with little background noise? If so, how does your pet react to "extra" sounds like a vacuum cleaner, a ringing telephone or a whistling teakettle? If your home is normally noisy, your pet may simply sleep through the usual sounds, but how does he react when something unusual occurs? The more strongly your pet reacts to unexpected sounds, the more important it is for you to help him adjust to the "baby sounds" which will become a regular part of your home environment.

Try to recognize what smells are prominent in your home, including your own personal scent. Your home has its own mixture of smells that makes it feel familiar and safe - cleaning products, kitchen odors, even dust. Also be aware of the products you use that help create your own individual scent, such as soaps, hair care products, toothpaste, deodorant, laundry detergent and cologne. Any new smells should be added gradually, layered on over a period of weeks. Be aware of the effect these scents have on your pet. While you do this, try to keep one part of your home smelling "right" for your pet.

In order to prepare your pet for the new baby, borrow some baby sounds and smells. Visit a friend's baby or a nursery and make a tape recording of baby sounds like gurgling, laughing, screaming, crying and kicking. Handle a baby and absorb some of the smells of baby lotion, powder and food. Go directly home and spend some positive, relaxed time with your pet. Give him a massage or play with him while the baby smells mingle with your own odors and you introduce the recorded baby sounds.

Start out with the volume turned low and if your pet doesn't react strongly to the sounds, gradually increase the volume to a normal level. As you play the tape, look at your pet softly and speak calmly, using your pet's name. Smile! It adds a special tone to your voice that helps your pet relax. Repeat these sessions daily until the baby's arrival. After a week or so, add the actual source of the odors to the sound-and-smell sessions with the supplies you'll be using for your own baby. Think about your pet's perspective. How does a baby bottle smell when it's freshly sterilized? When it's dirty? Borrow a dirty diaper and let your pet become accustomed to that smell, too.

Borrow a baby! After a few weeks, combine baby sounds and smells (which should be familiar to your pet by now) with the bustle and attention of a visiting baby. This is an excellent "dress rehearsal" for the extra visitors and attention you and your baby will receive during the first weeks after delivery.

After you bring your baby home, be aware of the ways you use your voice. Do you only speak to your pet with negative tones when the baby's in the room ("no," "off," "don't," "stop")? If so, your pet will certainly connect unhappy feelings with the baby's presence. While you hold your baby, smile at your pet and use his name. Give your pet a treat when the baby is fed to distract your pet from the smell of the baby's food. Make time with the baby a pleasant time for your pet as well.

Environment

If you'll be redecorating or rearranging your home, do it long before the baby arrives. With your supervision, let your pet explore any off-limit areas like the baby's room. Your pet can still see, smell and hear all the action and so can you. If an off-limits room has been a favorite area for your pet, this will be a major change for him. Move his favorite things from that room into another area, if possible in the same arrangement.

To boost your pet's confidence, establish a private, comfortable place that your pet can use as a safe retreat. Select an area you can close off, if necessary. The "safe-zone" should include a water bowl, a nest composed of a soft towel or your pet's bed and some worn, unwashed clothing with your smell on it. If your pet is a cat, you should include a litter box in this area also.

Your pet can choose to retreat here, or you can choose to confine him to this "safe-zone" when things get extra hectic. Spend some positive time with your pet in this area every day, and if he must be confined for an hour or so, it mustn't seem like punishment. During the transition, respect your pet's need for the rest and privacy. This will become especially important when your baby reaches the crawling stage. In addition to a "safe-zone", cats should also have access to plenty of escape routes, hiding places and perches.

Routine

Routine is important to pets because they need to know what to expect. Think ahead and gradually begin establishing new routines early on. Include in your adjusted schedule, at least once a day, quality time for just you and your pet, with no competition for your attention. This "non-baby" time is very important for your pet and for you!

Some of the changes in your post-baby routine won't be permanent, like getting up at all hours of the night. Help your pet handle temporary schedule adjustments by ignoring any extra attention-getting ploys used at those times. Try to get back to your normal routines as soon as possible.

Education

It's especially important that your dog learn proper behavior in the home, so that he can be safe for the baby. Visiting a basic obedience class and practicing the "Nothing in Life is Free" way of life (see our handout about the subject) would be very helpful. That way, your dog can learn more polite ways of getting your attention, rather than jumping up or barking. Regular training is also a good way to make sure that you spend time with your dog, so that he does not associate the arrival of the baby with the loss of your attention.

Whenever anything inappropriate is in your pet's mouth, say "drop it," placing a treat in front of his nose. When he drops the item in favor of the treat, praise him and let him have the treat immediately, then redirect him to an appropriate toy. As a "rule-of-thumb," if you don't want it in your pet's mouth, don't leave it on the floor.

Encourage a positive relationship between your baby and your "furry child" by involving them in activities you can all enjoy. Settle into your favorite chair by a sunny window, with your baby in your lap and your cat on the table beside you, so you can stroke them both at the same time. Walk with your baby in a stroller and your dog on a leash, just like before you had the baby come, but with this nice addition. Share mealtimes, and when your baby gets a treat or a toy, be sure your pet has something nice to hold, too.

If you have a dog that already shows signs of reactivity or aggression, do not wait until the baby comes to deal with the problem. Call our animal behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187, or email animals@hspca.org.