

PETS and CHILDREN

The birth of a baby or adoption of a new child is associated with a great deal of excitement, anxiety and stress for not only the family, but also the family pet. Some dogs and cats can have a difficult 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?

There are so many different variables involved that it is impossible to accurately predict the way that any pet will react to the arrival of children. However, there are considerations that give some insight into how your pet might react.

How much interaction has your pet previously had with children? How has your pet reacted? Obviously the most serious concern for new or prospective parents is the pet that has previously reacted aggressively, fearfully or both with children. If there have been previous problems of aggression you should contact your veterinary surgeon to determine the situations that have previously led to incidents, and the safest way, if any, to make the transition. If your veterinary surgeon is not able to offer appropriate advice you should seek referral to a local reputable behaviour counsellor. If the pet's previous problems were with a specific child, a specific age group or under specific circumstances, it may be possible to design a behavioural treatment programme to deal with the behaviour prior to the arrival of your new child.

If your dog has had little or no exposure to young children or babies a lack of early socialisation to children may lead to some initial anxiety or fear associated with the sights, sounds and smells of the new child. If there are no unpleasant experiences when the child first arrives, and the first few introductions are positive, there may be no problems. Even if your dog has not reacted aggressively to children in the past, keeping all introductions positive will help to get the relationship between your pet and your new child off to a good start.

Once the initial introductions are over the next consideration relates to the growth and development of your child. As a child progresses from being carried to rolling, crawling, and then to walking some pets may have trouble adapting to one or more of these changes. Fear, status related challenges, possessive displays, and playful behaviours could all result in aggression if you are not aware of how to anticipate, interpret and prevent situations of confrontation. Even when aggression is not displayed it is possible that your dog may begin to display other problem behaviours related to anxiety or fear, such as anorexia, compulsive disorders (e.g. flank sucking, acral lick dermatitis), or destructiveness (e.g. house-soiling, marking, chewing, digging).

What can we do to prepare for the new arrival?

Behaviour problems (destructiveness, house-soiling, compulsive disorders, increased demands for attention, generalised anxiety) may not develop directly from the arrival of the child, but rather from the changes in the household, associated with the new arrival. With nine months or more to prepare for a baby's arrival, the best way to minimise problems and help the pet to cope is to make changes gradually, so that they have been completed prior to the arrival of the child. Consider any changes that you may need to make in the pet's routine, 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 and if the pet is to be kept out of the room, access should be denied before the child's arrival. Otherwise, if your intention is to allow your pet to continue to enter the room when supervised, begin to accompany your pet into the nursery, so that it can adapt to the new smells and new set-up. The dog 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 dogs, reviewing or upgrading obedience skills is essential so that you can safely and effectively control your dog in all situations. Obedience training should be reviewed every day, in a variety of locations and circumstances. Practice each command in different rooms of the home, in the garden, while out on walks, and when visitors come to the home. Concentrate on those commands that are presently the least successful, using commands and rewards to achieve success and then gradually shaping the response so that the pet stays for progressively longer times, comes from greater distances and will heel and follow even when there are distractions. Any existing behaviour problems should be resolved before the arrival of your baby.

Some pets might become anxious or fearful as a result of any of the new and different stimuli associated with the sights, sounds, or smells of the new child. New activities associated with child care can be practised in front of pets so that they can become familiar with them. Tape recordings of babies crying, holding a doll wrapped in a blanket, taking your dog for a walk beside a pushchair or pram, or even going through the motions of changing a nappy and applying baby powder will simulate some of the experiences to which your pet will soon be exposed. If there is any sign of anxiety associated with any of these situations, then more formal reward-based training should be practised and repeated until the pet exhibits no problems in the presence of the stimuli. By providing a favoured chew toy, giving a food reward, or providing extra affection during these activities, your pet may actually learn to enjoy these new stimuli.

Once your pet shows no fear or anxiety in some or all of these situations, you may want to enlist the help of some friends or relatives with young children. Dogs can be taken for a walk while the child is pushed in the pushchair or pram. A baby can be carried around the home or nursed in the presence of the dog and children should be encouraged to play at the opposite end of a room or garden from where the dog is situated. The dog must be well controlled, preferably with a lead and head collar, and given food rewards and/or play to keep the association positive. A basket type 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 under strict adult supervision, but only if it remains friendly and shows no fear or anxiety.

For cats, the most important adaptation to the arrival of a new child is that related to changes that will be needed in the cat's home. Although fear and anxiety to the sights and sounds of a new baby are possible, adapting to changes in the household are often the most trying for cats. For example, obtaining new furniture, altering the cat's feeding, sleeping, elimination or play areas, and trying to keep the cat out of certain locations such as the cot, should all be considered before the arrival of the baby. To reduce the chances of the cat marking new furniture with urine or scratch marks, 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. Similarly, when the cot or Moses basket is first set up, the cat may wish to mark the area, to investigate, or even to sleep in it. Booby trapping areas can teach the cat to stay away from the areas of concern, well before the baby arrives.

Remember, each of these techniques are intended to help the pet adapt to changes in the household or lifestyle before the arrival of the baby. Once the baby arrives, there will be far less time to deal with the needs of the pet, and there will be additional variables to which your pet will need to adapt. Even if your pet does begin to exhibit fear or anxiety, during this pre-arrival training, such anxiety will not be associated with the presence of the child. The cat will have no reason to develop animosity to the new child.

What should be done when the baby arrives?

Do not try to rush the situation and always avoid any situations that might lead to fear, anxiety or discomfort in the baby's presence. Make all associations and experiences in the baby's presence positive. Maintain or even increase the amount and type of training, exercise, and play.

Even a curious and affectionate pet may have some problems adjusting to the new arrival. Jumping up to greet when the baby is being carried, barking during the baby's sleep, raiding the nappy bucket, licking the baby's face, or cuddling up to sleep against a small baby who is still unable to shift position are just a few of the concerns and potential problems that pet owners may need to deal with. It is essential to supervise all interactions between the pet and baby and to keep the pet out of the baby's room during sleep times. Ensuring that your dog is well controlled and responsive to obedience training commands is very useful and for some dogs, leaving a lead attached (preferably to a head collar) is a useful way to ensure additional control. You may also find it useful to keep your pet's claws well trimmed in order to avoid any accidents through scratching.

The most important aspect of retraining is to reward the pet for obedient and relaxed behaviour in the presence of the child. In many households there will be less time and energy available for the pet. While focused on the child, or attending to the chores associated with parenthood, the pet may be ignored, disciplined for approaching too close, or confined to a different area of the home. Your pet may still receive its play, exercise, affection, food and attention, but often not until the baby is finally asleep or is under the care of some other family member. Many pets soon learn that the presence of the baby is a time for lack of attention, confinement, or even punishment, while the absence of the baby is a cue for "good things" to happen. This must be reversed. 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 give affection to the pet, play with the pet, or do some reward training (stay, go to your bed) when the child is in the room. Take your dog outside for play or a walk when you are taking the child out. The aim is to teach the pet that positives or "good things" are most likely to happen in the presence of the child.

What should be done if aggression arises?

Such behaviour is very upsetting, regardless of its reasons. An immediate decision on whether to keep and work with the pet or remove it from the home must be made. Dogs targeting children may be motivated by fear, status or possessiveness to name but a few. Aggression, particularly fear related, may arise immediately when the child is brought into the home, or may begin as the child becomes more mobile. As the child grows a little older and begins to challenge the dog other forms of aggression such as that associated with status disputes within the household may start to be seen. Feline aggression toward children can be fear-induced territorial, or related to misdirected play or predation. For most aggression cases, especially those directed toward children, the guidance and advice of a behavioural counsellor is strongly suggested since it will be necessary to make an accurate diagnosis, determine the prognosis (the chances of safe and effective treatment) and guide you through a treatment programme. Although some cases may be treated quickly and safely, most cases require extensive precautions to prevent injuries and a great deal of time, effort and commitment to follow the treatment plan. Regardless of reason for aggression, biting dogs should be kept on a lead preferably with a head collar, muzzled and closely supervised in the presence of small children. Aggressive cats should be confined away from small children except when they are in a carrier, on a lead and harness, or well supervised.