

PROTOCOL FOR INTRODUCING A NEW BABY AND A PET

The addition of a new baby to a household can upset the social environment of that household and can upset the pets in the household. Steps can be taken to greatly reduce the probability of distress, and the potential risk that may go with distressed dogs and cats. The stepwise instructions below are primarily designed for two-parent families. However, it is possible to implement most of the instructions if only one parent is available, and notations for single parents have been made throughout the instructions.

Please remember that no animal should be left alone unsupervised with an infant for any reason. This is not because most animals are innately aggressive toward infants—they are not. But no infant would be capable of pushing an animal away if that animal cuddles up to them either for love or for heat. Until the child is old enough to behave absolutely appropriately with the pet (and that could be as old as 10 to 12 years), do not let children interact alone with the pets until you know how they will respond in a wide range of circumstances. This cautious behavior protects both the child and the pet.

Step 1

Before the baby comes, get your pet used to a regular schedule that you believe is realistic and that will be manageable when the baby is initially present. Start using the feeding, grooming, and walking schedules that your pet will experience once the baby is home. These schedules will probably be radically different than your current schedules, and it is best that your pets do not experience all baby-related changes at once when the baby arrives. Planning and practicing before the baby is born will make all the difference to your stress level and to how well you and your pet learn to adapt to the presence of a new child.

Include in your schedule a 5- to 10-minute period daily when you will attend only to your pet's needs. This period will provide your pet with quality time and can occur either in one bout or in two. During this time, pet your dog or cat, groom and scratch him, play with toys, use quiet and calm massage, talk to your pet—do all of the things your cat or dog likes but in a short, condensed session. This plan will allow you to rotate through various enjoyable activities by scheduling time to do so. Try to maintain this schedule no matter what (emergencies excepted), and make it one that can be implemented in the presence of the infant.

To accomplish this plan you may need to set your alarm 5 minutes earlier. You may have to have someone else watch the baby just in case the baby cries. You may also be able to watch over the baby while still giving your pet attention without terminating your session with your dog or cat unless the baby is distressed. How you choose to handle a crying baby will vary, but if you think about how this could affect your cuddle session with your pet, you will be able to make a sane and workable plan. Please remember that some pets are truly distressed by a child's cries. In this case, you will have the complex task of diminishing the pet's distress while attending to the baby's needs. The easiest way to do this may be to put your dog or cat on the other side of a door or gate.

Think of this time with your pet as time that you can set aside for you to relax also—the grooming, massage, and conversation with your pet can also be a respite for you. Be

realistic and do not feel guilty. Five or 10 minutes of concentrated attention is probably more time than you give your dog or cat as a block now. Although everybody will have to adjust to an infant's schedule, providing your pet with scheduled time for attention is one way that you can tell your dog or cat that he is still important to you. Realize that if you have multiple pets, each will need at least 5 minutes of undivided attention each day. If you have pets who get along particularly well with each other, you can certainly team them up to play with or to talk to them, but remember that the more animals you have, the more difficult it will be to give them all of the things that they need. This is one reason why no one recommends adopting a pet (especially a kitten or puppy) just before or after a new child is added to the household.

Step 2

Make your schedule realistic and implement it before the arrival of the child. It would be preferable if the schedule changes could be made as early as possible before the arrival of the child. This is a good time to consider changing the mechanism you use to walk your dog. If you are using a choke collar or a regular buckle collar and your dog is not flawlessly responsive without ever pulling you, please consider teaching the dog to walk on a head halter or a no-pull harness (see the **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses, and Leads** for photos and specific examples). *The time to ensure that your dog can pose no risk to you or the baby even if the dog is startled, or there is traffic, or the walk is icy, or when another dog approaches, is before the baby arrives.* Ideally, you will want to be able to take your dog with you everywhere you go with the baby where dogs are welcome, and you want the dog to behave well. In addition, you do not want to struggle with a baby in a backpack or in a stroller and a dog who is pulling. Pulling dogs may create a potentially dangerous scenario for all three of you. You may want the protection of the dog, the company of the dog, and the necessary exercise for the dog when you are with the baby. A well-behaved dog will give you this. And, if you are unable to take the dog everywhere you take the baby, the dog may feel that he has been displaced by the baby, which could cause the dog to withdraw or otherwise alter his behavior. Although it is inappropriate to use terms such as jealousy when discussing the manner in which the pet treats the baby, any dog or cat recognizes changes in attention. Pets will also realize that attention has been transferred to another individual, possibly promoting attention-seeking behaviors that will detract from both the time budget you have created and the enjoyable relationship you'd hoped for. The more often you can exercise the dog or cat—physically and cognitively—with the child, the better everybody's relationship will be. As soon as you learn that an infant will be arriving, obtain and learn to use one of the more modern head collars or harnesses.

Step 3

Before the baby arrives, allow your pet to explore the baby's sleeping and diaper-changing area. For the same reasons discussed previously, you do not wish to wholly exclude any dog or cat from every place the baby will be. These areas will

provide smells that are interesting to the dog or cat, so allow the pets to become familiar with them. By acclimating your dog or cat to the baby's room and items before the baby's arrival, you will avoid worrying about or yelling at your pet to get off the baby's items when the dog or cat is simply exploring a very interesting circumstance and environment. You will be using baby powder, lotions, diapers, and baby objects before you have the baby. Allow your cat or dog to become accustomed to these objects by sniffing, pawing, or nosing at them.

If the dog or cat tries to drag away any baby items, gently tell him that this is not okay, and ask the dog or cat to relinquish the object. If you are unable to get your pet to relinquish the object, now is the time to start teaching more appropriate manners, such as "sit," "stay," "drop," "down," "take it," and "drop it." Both cats and dogs can learn these cues, but we tend to worry more about dogs because of their size and the manner in which they interact. *If your dog cannot demonstrate success with these simple requests before the arrival of the baby, consider that you are likely to have serious management problems.* Now is the time, when you have some time, to address your pet's manners. It is insufficient to say that your dog has been to an obedience class if the dog still does not quickly and accurately respond to your request.

All dogs should have an emergency "stop" signal where they disengage from any activity and just stand still. Such a signal can save the dog's life in traffic, around wildlife and in an emergency situation. And it can also ease everyone's concern for accidents that could happen with a baby. If you do not know how to teach this request, and it requires only a special, protected word and the instructions provided in the **Protocol for Teaching Cats and Dogs to "Sit," "Stay," and "Come,"** please consider getting help from an excellent and humane trainer, such as those who are members of the Pet Professional Guild (www.petprofessionalguild.com). Mechanisms for teaching dogs these types of behaviors are also discussed in the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**.

Do not let your dog or cat make a habit of sleeping in or on any of the baby's furniture simply because it will only seem like a further estrangement when you do not allow the pet to do so once the baby arrives. Dogs and cats can become familiar with the area and explore it, but they cannot camp out there as if it was a newly designed perch spot just for them.

If your pet has toys that are stuffed, these may look just like infant or baby toys, so expect that your pet may think that he can play with the baby's toys. If you are willing to wash the baby and dog/cat toys, there is nothing wrong from a health standpoint. The big problem is that the pet—usually the dog—may round up and take all of the infant's toys. As the baby ages, the dog may drag the toys from the baby's hand. Babies can be unintentionally, but tragically, injured under such circumstances. It may be preferable to shift the dog to toys that do not closely resemble the toys the baby may have. Such toys can have different scents or different sounds associated with them. Alternatively, you can establish some rules for using and storing toys (e.g., toys on floor are the dog's and cat's, toys not on the floor are the baby's). If your dog can "sit" and "stay" and take an object and "drop it" at your request now, you can use that behavior to teach both the baby and the dog how to interact appropriately with each other later in life.

Step 4

When the baby is born, have whomever has been caring for your pet at the time take home some articles of clothing that the baby has used. Having access to the baby's clothes/blankets/towels will teach your pet not only that these new clothing smells are part of the new repertoire, but also that there is an infant involved. Dogs and cats can easily identify individuals and families by scent, so help them to use this skill to learn that there is a new human who is part of their family. Allow the pet to smell any relevant items. Distribute them around the house to incorporate the baby's odor into the entire household. In this way, you will facilitate what will be a natural canine and feline behavior.

It is also best to make arrangements for your pet to be cared for in your home in advance of the arrival of the infant. Advance notice is good because dogs and cats are rushed around in a surprising manner, left with strangers and shifted quickly from one place to another, only to return home to discover the infant. For special-needs dogs and cats, such upheaval can be truly mentally traumatic. It is preferable to have your pets cared for in your home because familiarity will decrease their overall stress level. Any pet, especially if he does not like being in a kennel or has never been kenneled, may become more anxious and fearful when removed to the kennel. Your pet could then learn to associate the advent of this fear and anxiety with the advent of a new arrival. You can wholly avoid this concern with advance planning.

Step 5

When the baby comes home, you will need help. Someone should hold the baby while you go in to greet the dogs and cats. You have been missing from the household while either having or going to meet the baby, and the pets will have missed you. You should be able to greet and pay attention to all pets without having to tell them to go away and without having to risk them inadvertently knocking you over or scratching the baby. If you have a dog who jumps, that dog should be put in another room until everything is calm and you can get inside and have the time to greet him in a way that is meaningful and helpful. You may want to introduce any jumping dogs, dogs who are difficult to control, or those exuberant to the rest of the family, on a lead, if the lead provides more control, but first you should greet your dog or cat as exuberantly as you are greeted. Remember that you have been gone and that is potentially scary for pets. After the greeting process, the baby should be held by someone else and kept out of the way. When you are ready to start introducing the pets to the new baby, harnesses and leashes can be very helpful. Introductions should only be begun once all pets are already quiet and calm and everything is back to a more normal situation. This could take 15 to 30 minutes. During this time, the pets might be curious about the baby, but they must first calm down from the earlier rambunctious mode.

Step 6

Once the initial pandemonium has ceased, you are ready to start formally introducing the pets to the new baby. Your partner, spouse, or a friend who is helping you, should sit

comfortably on the couch with the baby. You can then be responsible for controlling and monitoring your pet. The pet should be able to smell the baby and explore. Pets should be leashed or otherwise restrained in case they make any sudden movements toward the baby. If your pet is fearful of the baby, talk to him gently; use calm strokes while encouraging your dog or cat to quiet and to smell the baby. *Do not hold or dangle the child in front of the pet.* Such behavior could cause your pet to lunge simply to see the baby and is potentially dangerous. Dogs and cats and the baby will get used to each other on their own terms, but any infant that is dangling over a pet is in an abnormal social circumstance. If you are alone, you can put a harness on the pet and tie the harness to solid, stationary pieces of furniture with a leash. If you do this, you can then sit down at a distance where your pet can sniff the infant but not lunge. You can still verbally reward your cat or dog while enforcing this safe distance.

Remember to be calm at all times. Although one lick might be acceptable, you should be able to tell any dog or cat to cease licking and he should comply. If your dog or cat is unable to respond to a verbal request, licking is not acceptable simply because the risk that enthusiastic licking could injure an infant is high.

If your pet hisses or growls at the baby, you must be able to verbally stop those behaviors. If you cannot encourage your dog or cat to stop and come quietly to you, put him in another room until everyone is calm. As soon as everyone is calm, you can try this again in the same circumstances. Do not reassure your pets that it is “okay” and that “mommy” and “daddy” still love the pet—a truly unprovoked, aggressive behavior toward an infant is not okay. Most pets who are just worried readily learn that if they would like to be part of this expanded social circle and receive favorable attention, they must behave in a favorable manner toward the newest addition to the family.

If you have trouble getting your dog or cat to calm, in an emergency you can toss a towel or blanket over the cat or dog or toss some water on your pet simply as a disruptive stimulus. Then, you can remove your dog or cat to a quiet room and gradually work up to having her become accustomed to the baby. If your dog or cat does not respond to a verbal request to cease the threatening behavior as it starts, interrupt and remove the cat or dog, or interrupt the interaction and remove the child. You want to use the most humane interrupter possible that will allow you to safely protect and rearrange everyone. Most dogs and cats stop what they are doing if a blanket or towel is thrown over them, and this also allows feistier cats and dogs to be safely escorted from the room.

The next time this cat or dog approaches or is introduced to the baby, watch carefully to ensure a risky pattern is not developing. Remember that the point of any “correction” is to interrupt the dog or cat so that she aborts the worrisome behavior. You can then reinforce a more appropriate behavior, by rewarding—verbally, with a toy or with a treat—any other behavior that you find acceptable. The point of such interventions is not to terrify your pet. In fact, terrifying your dog or cat or brutally punishing her will grossly misfire and will teach your dog or cat that any time the infant is present horrible things happen. “Corrections” are best done immediately, or within the first 30 seconds of the beginning of the behavioral sequence, and that behavioral sequence usually starts with a look. For example, cats’ eyes usually become huge, their ears

move back, their hair is up, and she might arch the back, duck the neck, and retract the lips or sound nasty. Please do not wait for a pounce or a swat to interrupt, redirect, and remove any animal who is telling you that she is uncertain and worried. Tincture of time and gradual exposures are better than immersing any dog or cat in non-stop interaction with infants.

Step 7

When there is only one adult human at home with the infant during the first few weeks, pets should be restrained or confined in the presence of the infant. It is impossible for you to be sitting on the couch, ministering to a baby, and prevent an accident or attack involving the dog or cat, if the situation arises. The key for safe interactions is to avoid any aggression or any circumstances in which the dog or cat is uncertain and distressed. Both dogs and cats can be fitted with comfortable harnesses that can help keep them out of the range where they could even accidentally injure a baby.

Baby gates also work well for some dogs and cats. If the dog is prone to run through baby gates, a new baby is a potent stimulus. If you are tethering a dog or cat using a harness or using a gate, make sure that the full extent of the dog’s or cat’s reach, including the extent of the neck and head, is at least one dog/cat length away from the baby. Remember that you will invariably be nursing the baby, using your laptop, talking by phone, and the doorbell will ring at the same time. Any dog or cat who is problematic may wait for a moment when your guard is lowered to lunge at the baby. Most of the time these dogs and cats are just trying to get information helpful to them about household changes, but they could still injure an infant. Dogs and cats do not object to being banished from a room for short periods of time if their needs are otherwise met.

Step 8

If, after 3 weeks or so, your pet accepts the baby with no untoward behavior, try unleashing the dog or cat in the presence of another person who can help if anyone becomes startled. Regardless, you will still need to closely supervise and observe. It is best if one partner/spouse tends to the pet while the other tends to the baby. It is important that if two people are to share caretaking duties and the responsibility for reinforcing appropriate behavior, that one person does not always reinforce the dog or cat. Sharing and trading off the attention for the dog and the baby is critical for both people so that the dog or cat learns to associate the warm, loving environment with everybody. For dogs or cats who do not respond well to voice requests and for whom the baby is a strong stimulus, consider never leaving him alone with the child, even in passing, until the child can fend for herself. In some cases, dogs or cats should not be alone with the child if only one adult is available until the dog or cat can be taught to react more appropriately to the child.

Please do not believe that a muzzle will protect an infant or a young child from damage by a dog. Muzzles may prevent bites, but they do not dissuade the dog from lunging and pushing on the child. Infants and young children are particularly susceptible to crush injuries and, in many cases, skulls have been fractured by a dog that lands on a child in play, and without the intention to do damage. True accidents can still be tragic.

Step 9

If your pets do not pose a hazard (e.g., tripping, falling, jumping, grabbing) and they are truly just being social, there is no reason, once they are accustomed to the new baby, that they cannot accompany the parent around the house and be with the baby while she is being changed, bathed, and so on. In fact, this helps facilitate the future interaction between the child and the pet, and may help the child become a kinder, more humane individual by learning age-appropriate pet behavior. Regardless, any dog or cat so treated should be very responsive to voice requests so that no struggle should ever ensue in getting the dog to comply with a desired behavior.

Step 10

Under no circumstances should any pet be allowed to sleep in a room with an unattended infant or young child. Use a baby monitor, an intercom, or a room monitor, and close the door. Predatory tendencies are far less of a concern than is the fact that a dog or cat could inadvertently smother a child. The amount of guilt associated with a tragedy would be unbearable for both the new parent and the pet.

Step 11

If your pet is aggressive or frightened around the child, you should start exposing the pet to children very gradually. Go back to Steps 5 and 6. Such pets must be supervised in all interactions with children. Remember that even muzzled

animals can harm infants. Predatory aggression is the most common form of aggression shown by dogs to very young infants, whereas aggression caused by pain or fear is frequently associated with older children (18 to 36 months of age). These children are often uncoordinated and may inadvertently hurt a pet by their play or their ambulatory capabilities. Older pets who may be arthritic or that have painful hips or shoulders are particularly at risk, as are those with chronic ear conditions. These are body regions that children frequently grab. Young children should be taught to treat pets gently: no pulling, no tugging, and no pounding on them. Again, this is especially important if the pet is old, ill, or arthritic because any dog that is in pain may use a bite as its only defense against a rambunctious child. For more information see the **Protocol for Teaching Kids—and Adults—to Play with Dogs and Cats** and the **Protocol for Handling and Surviving Aggressive Events** for a list of age-specific behaviors that children may exhibit with pets.

Finally, there has been a well-documented link between animal abuse and child abuse. Children who abuse animals will progress to abuse of other individuals and will abuse their own children in the future. In turn, many children who are abused will abuse pets. If your child has a problem complying with age-specific, appropriate, humane, and gentle handling conditions of pets, it could be that the child has a problem or has observed this behavior from friends. If so, this potential problem should be explored. On the very positive side, appropriate pet-child behavior can be a wonderful experience and can help make the children more humane and socially well-adjusted.