Pets, Pregnancy and Introducing a New Baby

The introduction of a new baby into a household can cause both known and unforeseen changes. Therefore, it is incredibly important to understand your pet’s reaction to these changes and how to manage them.

Although jealousy is not an entirely appropriate term when referring to pets, they can display attention-seeking and competitive behaviour when they feel their owner’s attention has been displaced to another individual. Most problems arise from the anxiety caused by significant changes in the pet’s environment, lifestyle and the ways in which they interact with the family. Pets are also likely to have trouble adjusting if they have had previous unpleasant experiences with babies or children.

When preparing the family pet for the arrival of a new baby, you should ensure changes are gradual so they do not overwhelm the pet. Here are some tips on how to make this exciting time as stress-free as possible for your furry friend.

Before the Baby

Schedules and routines

- If your pet’s routine is going to change, it is best that this happens before the baby comes home. This way any changes will not be associated with the baby coming into the household.
- Get the pet into a schedule that is realistic and can be kept after the baby comes home and be sure to stick to it!
- Be sure to spend quality time with your pet each day. This will let your pet know that it is still important to you.
- Regular exercise program: make sure your pet gets its daily exercise.
- This is the perfect time to teach your dog to walk nicely and obey your commands, especially when crossing the road. That way you will be able to take the dog with you when you go for a walk with the baby.
- If the dog pulls excessively, a head collar such as a Halti or Gentle Leader should reduce this tendency, but it must be fitted correctly.
- You should provide your pet with regular activities that they can do when you are not there or when you are busy with the baby. These activities are known as environmental enrichment.
- Let your pet explore the baby’s sleeping and living areas so that it becomes familiar with the new smells that it finds interesting.
- If your pet tries to grab or drag any of the baby items, take the item away. Rather than trying to pull something out of the pet’s mouth and risk turning it into a tug of war game, swap the item for a treat or one of your pet’s toys.
- Do not let your pet sleep on the baby’s furniture.
- Your pet’s toys should not be similar to the baby’s toys. Never mix the toys and never let the pet play with the baby’s toys.
- If your pet has any bad habits, spend this time teaching it good manners/habits. When the baby comes along, you will need to have a reliable pet that responds to basic verbal commands.
- Pets must learn that in order to receive favourable attention from you they must display good behaviour.
The responsibility of training and rewarding the pet should be shared between all family members. That way the pet learns to behave appropriately in the presence of all family members. It is important to be consistent training so the pet understands exactly what is expected of it.

There is a risk that inappropriately administered punishment-based training can lead to increased aggression. We recommend positive reinforcement-based training as it is a safer and much more effective way to train your pets.

Consider your pet’s nature: You should carefully assess your pet’s nature and behaviour to identify just how much of a risk it may pose to your new baby’s health and safety.

**After the Baby**

- Whilst in hospital, it is recommended that your pet continues to be cared for in your own home. This will limit the amount of stress on the pet, prevent the pet from being overly excitable on your return home and also prevent the pet from having to return home to find a new baby there.

**Coming Home**

- This introduction ideally requires two adults. If your household only has one adult, we recommend you involve an adult friend or family member for the initial introduction at home.
- As soon as practicable, the mother should greet the pet in her normal fashion, as there is no doubt it will have missed her. Someone else should hold the baby while this takes place.
- Introductions to the baby should only begin when the pet is calm (this may take 15-30 minutes).
- When introducing a dog to the baby, one adult should securely hold the baby while another adult control the dog. The dog should be on a lead or harness for the initial introduction. If you have multiple pets, they should be introduced to the baby individually.
- The adult handling the dog should offer the pet rewards for any good and calm behaviour that it shows.
- If your pet is fearful or too excited and you do not feel comfortable handling it when the infant is near, it is recommended that you contact a behavioural trainer who can help you develop the appropriate techniques to introduce the pet and child.
- Dogs should never be encouraged to lick infants or children’s faces. Allowing this behaviour increases the potential for the transmission of disease.
- Try to stay calm and use a slow, quiet voice. If the pet reacts inappropriately, you have the lead in place to prevent it from doing anything detrimental. Use the lead to create more distance between the pet and the baby and try to settle the pet again.
- Make sure the pet associates the baby's presence with good things, such as patting and treats, rather than being ignored while all the attention is focused on the baby. All members of the household should lavish attention and treats on pets that behave well in the presence of the baby.
- Pets should be leashed or restrained in case they make any sudden movements. When pets are restrained, ensure that their reach (including extension of their neck and head) is at least one dog length away from the baby. This will also minimise any potential dangers caused by lunging. If, after three weeks or so, the pet shows acceptable behaviour, it may be unleashed. However, pets must always be supervised in the presence of an infant.

**Potential hazards and problems identified**

- Pets can pose a number of hazards. Issues such as tripping, falling, jumping and crushing injuries are more common with infants and young children.
• Under no circumstances should a pet be able to sleep in a room with an unattended infant or young child.
• No animal should be left alone with an infant for any reason. This is not because animals are innately aggressive but rather a baby/child cannot move an animal away if it cuddles up next to them for protection or warmth, which could result in smothering.
• Any child under 10 years of age should not be left to interact alone with pets.
• Predatory aggression is the most common form of aggression shown by dogs to very young infants.
• Aggression caused by fear or pain is frequently associated with older children (18-36 months) as these children are often uncoordinated and inadvertently hurt the pet.
• Young children should be taught to treat pets gently – no pulling, tugging or pounding.
• Children should not be allowed to play with or touch the dog while it is eating, sleeping or resting. These are times when a child is more likely to get bitten.

Practise good hygiene during pregnancy and with children in the home
When caring for pets it is important to minimise both the onset and/or spread of disease to either the pet or other members of the family. Here’s how:
• Maintain your pets worm and flea prevention measures. Ask your vet for advice or when your pet is due for these.
• Hand washing between contact of pets and the baby.
• Regular pet washing/grooming.
• Regular vacuuming of the environment and removing stools from garden or litter trays.
• Cover sandpits so cats can’t get in them to toilet.
• Avoid raw meat diets for pets.
• Wear shoes in gardens/parks where dogs frequent.
• Pregnant women should avoid or wear gloves when gardening and cleaning out litter trays.

Do you have concerns about your pet?
If you have any concerns about your pet’s behaviour before the baby arrives, it is better to identify and address these issues now. This may include:
• Seeking veterinary advice or getting an experienced trainer or behaviourist to help manage your pet’s behaviour concerns.
• Crate training, desensitisation training, addressing anxiety and reinforcing good obedience is all essential.
• Re-housing or even euthanasia, this sometimes need to be considered if the behavioural issues cannot be appropriately addressed prior to baby arriving.