

Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival

The arrival of your new family member will bring changes for everyone. 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, but you can help your pet adjust to the big changes ahead by making gradual adjustments before the baby arrives.

Sounds and Smells

The baby's arrival will add some new and different smells and sounds to those your pet is accustomed to, so it's important to introduce them gradually and in a calm and pleasant atmosphere.

Each time you introduce something new to your pet, make the experience positive. Pet him, give him treats, and praise him for his good behavior when he's faced with a new sound or smell.

Think about the normal sounds of your household. Is your home quiet, with little background noise? If so, how does your pet react to noises like a vacuum cleaner, a ringing telephone, or a whistling teakettle? If your home is normally noisy, your pet may simply ignore 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 that will become a regular part of your home environment.

You can buy a CD of baby sounds. Start out with the volume turned down fairly low. If your pet doesn't react strongly to the sounds, gradually increase the volume to a normal level. As you play the recording, praise your pet and offer tasty treats. Repeat these sessions daily until the baby's arrival.

Borrow some baby smells. Handle a friend's 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. After a week or so, add the actual sources of the smells with the supplies you'll be using for your own baby. 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. Be sure to keep your pet on his leash and carefully supervise all interactions. This is an excellent dress rehearsal for the extra visitors and attention you and your baby will receive during the first few weeks after delivery.

When the baby finally arrives, have Dad bring home something the baby has worn in the hospital. You can place the item near your pet's food bowl, or just feed your pet some yummy treats while he sniffs the item.

Environment

If you'll be redecorating or rearranging your home, do it long before the baby arrives. Let your pet explore any off-limit areas, and then exclude him from these areas before the baby arrives. Screen doors are excellent, inexpensive barriers for 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-limit 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.

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, your pet's bed, and some worn, unwashed clothing with your smell on it. You should also include a litter box in this area.

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 shouldn't seem like punishment. During the transition, respect your pet's need for 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. 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!

Rules and Manners

Reinforce the positive ways a cat behaves by doing "Nothing in Life Is Free" (see our handout: "Nothing In Life Is Free"). If your pet hasn't learned basic manners, now is the time to start. Train your cat to sit and lie down on cue. "Drop it" and "leave it" are also handy behaviors to have on cue and will be especially important when your hands are occupied with baby and paraphernalia.

Be sure that your pet understands when (if ever) jumping onto people or things is appropriate. For example, if your cat has access to any surface in your home (counters, tables, and so forth), decide which places will be off-limits after the baby's arrival. Start training your cat now to discourage jumping onto those places and provide plenty of appropriate alternate high-up places, like a cat tower. Dogs should also only be allowed to jump when permission is given.

If your pet likes to spend time in your lap, teach him to ask permission before jumping up, by doing "Nothing in Life is Free". You don't have to eliminate lap time completely, just limit access to those times when you can give him your full attention and an entire lap. Teach your pet that your voice, your look, and your presence are also positive forms of attention — you don't always need to touch him to show affection. You can do this simply by talking calmly and pleasantly to him as he lies or sits nicely at your feet. Use his name, smile, and make eye contact.

After Baby Arrives

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 is in the room ("no," "off," "don't," "stop")? If so, he will certainly connect unhappy feelings with the baby's presence. While you hold your baby, smile at your pet and use his name. Make the time with the baby a pleasant time for your pet as well.

Insist on good manners from the beginning. Don't respond to whining, barking, or other attention-getting behavior. Give your pet plenty of time and attention whenever you can but not when he's demanding it. Plan short periods of play time, treat time and snuggle time— with and without your baby in the room.

Encourage a positive relationship between your baby and your pet 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 a 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.