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Baby and the Beast

Thoughts on bringing baby home

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Nearly everyone has memories of a special childhood pet. An animal companion can teach children precious lessons about respect and unconditional love. To make a new baby's arrival a happy experience for pets as well as for parents, plan ahead, be consistent, and allow time for everyone to adjust.

Are they really jealous?

While some pets may seem upset when a new baby arrives, it's not exactly from jealousy. Pets react to sudden lack of attention or upsetting changes in routine. Punishment is taken personally: If pets are constantly scolded and told to get away, why should they be happy that baby is around? A consistent, positive and loving approach will benefit your pets just as it benefits your baby.

PREGNANCY AND CATS

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, primarily found in raw meat and in soil. Over 60 million people in the US carry the parasite, yet it rarely causes health problems in people with normal immunes. Pregnant women are at risk, since birth defects can result if infected during or just before pregnancy. (If exposed earlier in life, there is no pregnancy risk.) Cats pick up 'toxoplasma' by eating raw meat, infected rodents and birds, or walking in contaminated soil and then licking their paws. Humans can then be infected through contact with the cat's feces. You do NOT have to give up your cat! Handling raw meat is the more likely danger. Follow these precautions:

- ▶ Avoid handling raw meat, but if you must, be sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterward. Cook meat thoroughly for each meal.
- ▶ Use gloves for gardening or handling soil and sand outdoors. Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly.
- ▶ If possible, have someone besides the pregnant woman take on the litterbox duty. Otherwise, wear disposable gloves, clean boxes with hot water and disinfectant, and wash hands thoroughly afterward.
- ▶ Clean litterboxes at least once each day. Since the *Toxoplasma* parasite requires about 36 hours after it leaves the cat before it can infect you, daily cleaning of litterboxes is a simple way to avoid infection.

ATTENTION AND PLAY

Make my day...

That scratch behind the ear or nonsense greeting may seem minor to you, but they are important to your pet's routine. Think about your current patterns of interaction with your pet, and once baby arrives, don't let those "sweet nothings" disappear.

Synchronized attention works for pets too

It's just a fancy name for giving attention to a group, instead of one-on-one. Experts recommend giving baby and siblings synchronized attention to help reduce the jealousy of older children, and so that when the baby is asleep, you can rest or do other things that need doing instead of responding to a rush of new demands from the other children. The idea is perfect for pets. Realistically you cannot expect to have as much time to spend with pets individually, so keep them involved to reduce their need for attention. Allow pets to be nearby when you care for baby. Take baby in the snuggly when it's time to walk the dog. Toss a paper wad or feather toy for kitty to chase while you're rocking the baby. Pets will like new toys as much as your baby does. Talk to your children and pets together. Feed everyone at the same time - and if your pet gets up with you at the 2am feeding, surely he deserves a little treat! When baby is sleeping, pay less attention to your pets too. They will quickly come to associate the baby's presence with all the good things in life.

Busy paws are happy paws

Encourage pets to occupy themselves. A Kong toy stuffed with cheese or kibble will keep some dogs busy for hours. Dogs and cats alike can enjoy a treat ball or cube toy filled with dry food - as they play with the toy, the food is slowly dispensed. An aquarium at eye level or a carpeted window seat will be appreciated by your cat. Enlist the help of older children, or hire a dog walker or pet sitter to help pets get as much physical exercise as possible - it pays off for all of you.

Important! Never leave a baby or small child unattended with pets.

PREPARATION IS THE KEY!

Don't wait until your due date to start making huge changes in your household! Pets depend on routine. Start adjusting your pet's schedule of food, exercise, grooming, and other care long before baby arrives.

Daily routine Most pets expect your attention when you first get up. But soon you'll be getting up with the baby in the morning and several times at night. So start right now: Whenever you get up, walk into the nursery for a moment, so that pets learn it's your first stop. If your pet's sleeping arrangements will change once baby is here, adjust it now, slowly. Leave old beds in place at first while introducing new ones. Same with the location of food dishes and litterboxes. Pets will respond if given time to adjust. Being consistent and staying positive offers the best chance of success.

Setting up the nursery Familiarize the pets to the baby's belongings. Turn on the mechanical swing, sit in the rocking chair, play the musical toys. Keep cats out of baby's bed with crib netting. Train pets to avoid surfaces used by the baby; perhaps put down a rug or bed as the pet's special place to be whenever they are in the baby's room. Take pets with you when you leave the room so they learn that they are never here without you (make it fun with a treat when you leave the room together). Motion detectors and nursery monitors help you keep track of pets as well as baby. Baby gates or barriers can help manage traffic. Adding a screen door to the baby's room is a great option to keep pets out while allowing the baby to be seen and heard.

Sights, sounds, scents Play a tape of babies crying and cooing. Have all family members use small amounts of the baby's lotion or soap from time to time, so that the scent is familiar before baby arrives. Play dolls with your pet - better yet, have some real babies come to visit! Practice managing the dog, leash and stroller.

'Pre-natal' visit for pets! See the vet. Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce hormone urges. Keep pets' claws trimmed to prevent accidental scratches. (Don't assume that declawing your cat will prevent injuries – it may result in a cat who bites instead when threatened.)

Brush up on the basics Manners matter! For your safety, teach your dog to be polite on stairs – have the dog wait at top or bottom and then come to you for a treat or toy. The “leave it” command will help keep Rover from grabbing pacifiers that fall on the floor. An obedience refresher now will pay off later when you need your pet's full cooperation. If your cat jumps in your lap, begin using treats to guide the cat to jump up beside you instead. (Before long, you won't have a lap anyway!)

A HAPPY HOMECOMING

Let pets be a part of baby's homecoming, as much as you can within reason. Don't stash the dog in the backyard, but do control his movement. Have him lie calmly on his rug if he's willing; otherwise, keep him crated or leashed near you while things settle down. This would be the perfect time for an extra-special treat!

Bringing in baby—Have the person that the pet is least attached to be the one to carry baby into the house. Let the pet's favorite person greet the pet alone, without the baby. Let him smell the receiving blanket if he wants to.

First contact must be controlled—dogs on leashes, no distractions, no visitors. Sit with the baby in a comfortable chair in a quiet room. Allow pets to approach and observe from a few feet away until you are confident about a closer meeting. Talk softly, move slowly, and touch gently, even if you are removing the animal from the room. Speak calmly and happily - if you seem nervous, your pet will be nervous too. Reassure pets if they appear anxious. Don't pull pets out of hiding or force any contact – your main goal is simply for the pets to be happy and relaxed around the baby. Take your time—no need to rush.

Be extra careful when the baby is screaming, crying or waving its arms and legs. It is wise to put the dog in another room or call the dog and place him in a sit or stay at several feet distance. For the first week or so, keep a trailing leash on your dog when he's around the baby. You don't need to hold it, just have it connected in case you have to grab it in a hurry.

Don't punish pets for showing signs of discomfort around the baby. Punishing a dog for growling cuts off his line of communication to you. If he can't tell you when he's upset, he may be more likely to bite without warning. Patience and positive reinforcement are the ways to convince him that kids are good to have around. If he's unhappy, give him some space but don't start removing the baby whenever the pet objects. Always praise your pet when he's well behaved around baby.

PAWS OFF!

To teach pets to stay off the baby's furniture, use doublestick tape or shelf liner (placed sticky side up) - these can be placed on the bassinet, mattress, changing table, etc. Or try pieces of clear plastic carpet runner, placed pointy side up in front of furniture you want the pet to avoid. To discourage a cat from jumping up on high places like the changing table, gather a few empty soda cans and some pieces of cardboard. Put a few pennies inside each can. Lay the cardboard along the edge of the furniture to create a false ledge that sticks out a few inches, and set the cans on top to hold in place. When kitty tries to jump, the ledge won't hold, and the cans will hit the floor with a scary noise, but no harm. Set up the high chair ahead of time to teach cats and dogs it's off-limits.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Whenever your dog or cat shows a change from normal routine, it may be the start of a problem or an indicator that the adjustment is hard on your pet. Early signs may include housesoiling, loss of appetite or diarrhea, sudden shyness, excessive barking, self-mutilation, apparent anxiety or trembling, or destructive behavior. There are ways to help your pet work through these problems—call us if you need assistance.

I was here first!

Give pets a safe place to retreat from chaos. This is even more important as your baby grows and is still learning to be gentle with pets. Pets need an escape route when they've just had enough. Keep food dishes and litterboxes out of your child's reach, for your child's safety and your pet's peace of mind.

A WORD OF WARNING

Does your dog live to chase cars and bicycles, or to prey on cats or other small animals? Does he guard his food or toys? Has he ever bitten anyone? In all of these cases, consult a professional trainer to assess these behaviors and the circumstances in which they have occurred. For everyone's safety, evaluate the situation honestly before baby comes home.

Call us!

For more suggestions and help with problem-solving.

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