

PROTOCOL FOR INTRODUCING A NEW BABY AND A PET

From “Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals” by Karen Overall, M.A., V.M.D., Ph.D.

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 this happening by following the instructions below. These instructions are primarily designed for two-parent families. However, it is possible to implement most of the instructions if only one parent is available; notations about this have been made throughout. 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, but rather because 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 years of age), do not let children interact alone with the pets until you know how they will respond in those circumstances. This protects both the child and the pet.

Step 1

Before the baby comes, get the pet used to a regular schedule that you believe is realistic and that will be kept when the infant is present. Start the feeding and walking schedule that the animal will experience once the infant comes. This schedule will probably be radically different than the current schedule, and it is best that they do not experience all the changes at once when the baby arrives. Include in the schedule a 5- to 10-minute period daily when you will attend only to the pet's needs. This period will represent its quality time and can occur either in one bout or in two. During this time, pet the animal, groom it, scratch it, play with toys, talk to it, massage it, and so on. Maintain the schedule no matter what, and make it one that can be implemented in the presence of the infant. This may necessitate setting an alarm clock 5 minutes earlier or agreeing that even if a baby cries at some point, you will not interrupt the

interaction with the pet during those periods if the baby is not overly distressed and if the pet is not distressed by the child's cries. You might also find that this is a time you can set aside for you to relax; the grooming, massage, and conversation with the pet will help you relax. Be realistic and do not feel guilty. Five or 10 minutes of concentrated attention is probably more time than you give the animal as a block now. Although everybody will have to adjust to an infant's schedule, this is one way that you can tell the animal that it is still important to you and it counts. Realize that if you have multiple pets, each will need at least 5 minutes of undivided attention each day. If you have pets that 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.

Step 2

Start the dog on a leash-walking schedule that you anticipate can be maintained with a baby. 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 the dog does not behave properly instantaneously, now is the time to teach the dog to walk in a head halter (either a Halti or, preferably, a Gentle Leader Promise System Canine Head Collar) or to teach it to walk on a no-pull harness (Lupi or Sporn harness). This is the time to get the pet under control so that you are able to take the 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 that is pulling. That is a potentially dangerous scenario that is potentially injurious 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 controlled dog will give you this. In addition, if you are unable to take the dog everywhere you take the baby, the dog will learn that the baby has displaced it in that role in the family. 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 will realize that it is not getting the same amount of attention. Pets will also realize that this attention has been transferred to another individual. This phenomenon could then promote attention-seeking behaviors that are designed to be competitive with the attention the infant is now getting. The more often you can exercise the dog (or cat, if the cat enjoys the exercise) 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 a device such as the Gentle Leader Promise System Canine Head Collar, a Halti, or a no-pull harness.

Step 3

Again, before the baby arrives, allow the pet to explore the baby's sleeping and diaper changing area. For the same reasons discussed previously, you do not wish to wholly exclude the dog from every place the baby will be. These areas will provide smells that are interesting to the dog or cat. Let the dog or cat become familiar with them. You will be using baby powder, lotions, diapers, and baby objects before you have the baby. Let the dog or cat become accustomed to these by sniffing and even pawing or nosing at them.

If the dog or cat tries to drag any baby items off, correct it by telling it "No" and asking the animal to relinquish the object. If you are unable to get the dog to relinquish the object, now is the time to start teaching the dog more appropriate manners, such as "sit," "stay," "drop," "down," "take it," and "drop it." If your dog cannot do these before the arrival of the baby, you will have serious management problems. Now is the time, when you have some time, to address them. It is insufficient to say that your dog has been to an obedience class if the dog still does not respond to you instantaneously for a vocal command. Mechanisms for teaching dogs these types of behaviors are discussed in the "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1."

Do not let the pet make a habit of sleeping in or on any of the baby's furniture. It will only seem like a further correction when you do not allow the pet to do so once the baby arrives. Do let the animal become familiar with the area.

If your pet has had toys that are stuffed animals that may look just like infant or baby toys, expect that the pet will think that it can play with the baby's toys. If you are willing to wash these, there is nothing wrong from a health standpoint; however, the big problem will be that 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. 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 your partner (or whoever is caring for the pet at that time) take home some articles of clothing that the baby has used. This will teach the animal not only that these new clothing smells are part of its new repertoire, but also that there is an infant involved. Allow the pet to smell these items. Leave them around the house.

It is also best to make arrangements for the pet to be cared for in your home in advance of the arrival of the infant. Advance notice is good because the animal will be 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. It is preferable to have the dog watched for in your home because this decreases the dog's stress level. A dog, especially if it does not like being in a kennel or has never been kenneled, may become more anxious and fearful when removed to the kennel. The pet can learn to associate the advent of this fear and anxiety with the advent of a new arrival.

Step 5

When the baby comes home, you will need help. Someone, whether or not he or she is your partner, should hold the baby while you go in to

greet the animals. 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 the animals 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 that jumps, the dog should be put in another room until everything is calm and you can get inside to greet it. You may want to introduce any jumping dogs or dogs that are difficult to control or exuberant to the rest of the family on a leash if it provides more control, but first you should greet the dog or cat exuberantly. Remember, 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 to introduce 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, 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 the 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 aggressive (or even non-aggressive) movements toward the baby. If the pet is fearful of the baby, talk to the pet gently, rub it, massage it, and encourage it to smell the infant. Do not hold or dangle the child in front of the pet. This could cause the pet to lunge. It is a wholly inappropriate and potentially dangerous behavior. The animals and the baby will get used to each other on their own terms; certainly, 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 the

pet can sniff the infant but not lunge. You can still verbally reward the pet while enforcing this safe distance.

Remember to be calm at all times. Although one lick might be acceptable, you should be able to tell the animal to stop instantly. If the animal is unable to respond to a verbal correction, licking is not acceptable. If the animal hisses or growls at the infant, you must be able to verbally correct those behaviors. If not, take the animal and put it in another room until it is calm. As soon as it is calm, you can try this again in the same circumstances. Do not reassure the pets that it is "okay" and that "Mommy" and "Daddy" still love the pet; an aggressive behavior toward an infant is not okay. The animal must learn that if it wants favorable attention from you, it must behave in a favorable manner toward the newest addition to the family.

If you have trouble getting the animal to calm down or getting it to respond to a verbal correction (this might be particularly true with cats), you can try using a water pistol. Squirt the animal as it begins to hiss or look aggressive. Remember that cats that take showers will not respond quickly to water, and you may have to use a higher power water pistol or one that has a small amount of lemon juice or vinegar added to the water in it. Remember that the point of any correction is to startle the animal so that it aborts the behavior, and you can then reinforce a more appropriate behavior. The point of these corrections is not to terrify the animal. In fact, terrifying the animal or brutally punishing the pet will grossly misfire and will teach the animal that any time the infant is present horrible things happen. Corrections are best done in the first 30 seconds of the beginning of the behavioral sequence, and that behavioral sequence usually starts with a look. Cats' eyes usually become huge, the ears are moved back, the hair is up, and the cat might arch its back, duck its neck and retract its lips or sound nasty. Please do not wait for a pounce or a swat to correct any animal.

Step 7

If there is only one parent 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 a pet attack if the situation arises. The key is to avoid any aggression or any circumstances in which the pet might be unsure of what the appropriate behavior would be. If the pet is a dog, it can be leashed at a distance with either a head halter or a harness or, if the dog does not pull, a neck collar. The animal can still be close to the baby and you can pet it, but the dog cannot lunge and reach the baby. Baby gates also work well for some dogs. If the dog is prone to run through baby gates, a new baby is a potent stimulus. If you are tying the animal, make sure that the full extent of the animal's reach, including the extent of the neck and head, is at least one dog length away from the child. This is because you will invariably be nursing the baby, typing on a computer, and the fax machine and the doorbell will ring at the same time. Any dog that is problematic may wait for a moment when your guard is lowered to lunge at the baby. Cats are more difficult, but many cats adjust well to leashes and harnesses; otherwise, many cats do not object to being banished from the room for short periods of time.

Step 8

If, after 3 weeks or so, the pet accepts the baby with no untoward behavior, it can be unleashed. Regardless, the pet still needs to be closely supervised and observed. It is best if one partner 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. Sharing and trading off the attention for the dog and the baby is critical for both people so that the dog learns to associate the warm, loving environment with everybody. For dogs that do not respond well to voice commands and for whom the baby is a strong stimulus, the dog should never be alone with the child, even in passing, until the child can fend for himself or herself. In many cases that dog should not be alone with the child if only one adult is available until the dog can be taught to react more appropriately to the child. Please do not believe that a muzzle could protect an infant or a young child from damage from 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 without the intention to do damage.

Step 9

If the pets do not pose a hazard (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 he or 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 so treated should be very responsive to voice commands 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 for the pet.

Step 11

If the 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 that may be arthritic or that have painful hips or shoulders are particularly at risk, as are those with chronic ear conditions. These are areas 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.

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.