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INTRODUCING AN INFANT TO A RESIDENT DOG

One of the most common questions asked by an expectant parent (or grandparent) to a veterinarian is how to introduce a new infant to the family dog, particularly if the dog has not been exposed to infants before. Most dogs readily accept infants after a period of curiosity. However, there have been unfortunate incidents where infants have been injured by family dogs. It is because of these incidents that the following information is provided.

There are three types of dogs which parents should be particularly concerned about:

1. those that have already manifested aggressive tendencies to babies.
2. those that are aggressive to adults.
3. Those that have a history of predatory behavior (i.e., they chase and kill squirrels, birds, cats, goats, sheep or other mammals).

If you have a dog with these behaviors, we recommend consultation with an animal behaviorist for advice on if and how you should introduce your dog to your new child.

Fortunately, most dogs look upon a baby with curiosity and show no signs of aggression. However, some dogs perceive an infant as a strange mammal and a potential item of prey. Dogs that have never seen a baby probably do not view them as young human beings or even as small people. To help prevent accidents (sometimes fatal), some precautions should be taken.

The following protocol is designed for people to follow when they wish to be especially careful in introducing a baby to a non-aggressive family dog. The procedures should begin before the baby is born.

Because the owner will want to keep the dog quiet and under control when the baby is near, the dog should sit or lie down on command, and remain that way unless permitted to get up. It should be taught to remain calm and in a sitting position. Because the commands "sit" and "stay" will eventually be used in conjunction with the baby, they should not be associated with punishment.



Owners should begin by teaching their dog to sit and stay for food rewards. The dog is initially required to sit only for a few seconds. This time is gradually increased as the dog continues to learn. Simultaneously, the activity level around the dog is made more distracting. For example, while the dog is sitting, the person takes a step backward and then forward and then rewards the dog if it remains sitting. Next, the owner takes two steps backward, returns to the dog, takes a step to the side, then two steps to the side, etc. Gradually the owner extends the range and speed of activities, moving across the room, sitting down, standing up, rattling doorknobs, etc. The dog is rewarded for sitting and not becoming distracted.

After the dog has demonstrated it can remain seated while the owner performs other activities, you should then begin simulating activities that will occur with the baby. While the dog is in a sit/stay position, the owners can carry a doll wrapped in blankets, rock the doll in their arms, let the dog look at the doll while keeping the dog in a sit/stay position, pretend to diaper the doll, etc. The dog is rewarded for sitting and remaining calm as people engage in these activities. A firm "no" is appropriate if the dog begins to get up when it should not. However, if the owners must repeatedly say "no", it may be time to review with your dog. At no time should the owner berate the dog with threats or hit it for getting up. The idea is to avoid associating punishment with words such as "no" or "stay" because the parent will later use those words to restrain the dog in the presence of the baby. The owners should look at these practice sessions as games and not as discipline exercises.

Before the baby is brought into the house, items such as the infant's clothing or blankets can be brought home to allow the dog to become familiar with the baby's odor. Initially, the dog should be permitted to sniff and smell the items as much as it wishes. Later, the owners might have the dog sit and stay as they pick up and put down these items, carry them, etc.



When the mother returns from the hospital, the dog should be allowed to greet her without the baby present. Only after the dog has calmed down should the baby be presented to the dog. Sometimes it is a good idea to keep the dog and baby separate for several hours, while allowing the dog to sniff more items of clothing and become aware that the baby is in the house. This way, the dog can begin to get used to the baby being in the house without actually being close enough to investigate it. The dog can adjust to the sounds and odors of the baby.

The appropriate time to introduce a baby to a dog is when the dog is calm and the baby is quiet. Optimally, two people should help with the introduction, one to control and reward the dog and the other to hold the baby.

Depending upon the personality of the dog, the person holding the baby may be sitting or standing. The dog should be on a leash in a sit/stay position and is rewarded with petting or praise. By this time, food rewards should no longer be necessary. Gradually, dog and baby are brought closer together. The dog should be allowed to see the baby but remain in a sitting position. As long as the dog is quiet, it should be allowed to remain nearby until it is necessary to move the baby or the baby becomes restless. Such introductions should be repeated several times during the first day. The dog may eventually be brought close enough so it can smell the baby, but not close as to be able to bite. The owner must use his or her own discretion as to when it is appropriate to let the dog sniff the baby closely. If after several introductions the dog is not unduly excited and can be verbally controlled, the procedures can be repeated without a leash.

The next step is to allow the dog to wander loose while the owner is with the baby. The dog should not, however, have access to the baby in unsupervised situations. A screen door can be put on the baby's room or the dog confined to areas of the house where it does not have access to the baby in the absence of the owners. The dog should be allowed as much freedom in the house and interaction with the adults as possible. Initially, when the parents prepare to play with the baby in the dog's presence, they should also interact with the dog in some manner. They might say, "let's go see the baby," or ask the dog to sit and pet it or give it a tidbit. Again, food rewards are not necessary every time the owner asks the dog to sit or stay but intermittent food rewards keep its performance level high.

No one knows when a dog understands that an infant is a person. Most dogs adjust to the infant within a few days, while others may take several weeks. After the dog has been with the child for many hours and has become used to the child's sounds and movements (i.e., pays little attention to these activities and is not aroused by them), the parents can begin to relax supervision of the dog in the presence of the child. This depends on the dog's history of aggression, especially predatory behavior. It is unlikely that an unfortunate incident would occur after a period of time if the dog is non-aggressive, relaxed and relatively uninterested in the baby in supervised circumstances. If the owners are concerned, they may put a latched screen door on their baby's bedroom door or put up gates to prevent access to the child when the owner is not there.

Most incidents of dogs injuring or killing babies occur within the first few hours of the infant's presence in the home, when the dog unexpectedly comes upon the new baby in an unsupervised situation. It is believed that predatory behavior is the motivation for attacks on infants.

To get used to the infant, the dog must be gradually exposed to the infant. Initial contacts must be supervised and fun for the dog so it does not associate adverse events or punishment with the baby. With close supervision and patience, most pets bond with the infant in a special way that benefits them both. There is nothing more rewarding than watching your two- and four-legged children playing and growing together!

