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Introducing a Baby to a Dog

One of the most common questions asked of a veterinarian by an expectant parent (or grandparent) is how to introduce a new baby to the resident dog, particularly if the dog has not been exposed to infants before. There are 3 types of dogs about which parents should be particularly concerned: 1) those that have already manifested aggressive tendencies to babies; 2) those that are, in general, also 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 dogs with such histories are identified, it would be wise to consult an animal behavior therapist for advice on if and how they should manage future dog-child interactions.

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.

Because you will want to keep the dog quiet and under control when the baby is in its vicinity, the dog should reliably sit or lie down on command, and remain that way unless permitted to get up, regardless of other activities. It should be taught to remain calm and in a sitting position, for pleasant rewards rather than to avoid punishment. Because the commands "sit" and "stay" will eventually be used in conjunction with the baby, they should not be associated with punishment.

It is best to begin by teaching their dog to sit and stay for delicious tidbits. The dog is initially required to remain only for a few seconds, and this time is very gradually increased. Simultaneously, the activity level around the dog is made progressively arousing. For example, while the dog is sitting, you take a step backward and then forward and then reward the dog, if it is still sitting. Next, you take 2 steps backward, return to the dog, take a step to the side, then 2 steps to the side, etc. Gradually you extend the range and speed of activities, moving across the room, sitting down, standing up, rattling door knobs, etc. The dog is rewarded for sitting and not accompanying you on these sojourns.

After the dog has demonstrated it can remain seated while you perform numerous, rapid activities, you may then begin simulating activities that will occur with the baby. While the dog is in a sit/stay position, you can carry a dog 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 you must repeatedly say "no," something is wrong with the training procedures. At no time should you berate the dog with threats or hit it for getting up. The idea is to avoid associating unpleasant events (punishment) with such words as "no" or "stay" because you will later use those words to restrain the dog in the presence of the baby. You should look at these practice sessions as games and not as discipline exercises.

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

When you return from the hospital, the dog should be allowed to greet you 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 of the general presence of the baby. In this manner, the dog can begin to get used to the presence of the baby in the house without actually being close enough to investigate it. The dog can adjust, somewhat, to the sounds and odors of the baby.

The appropriate time to introduce a baby to a dog is after the dog's excitement level has dissipated and the baby is in a quiet mood. Optimally, two people should help with the introduction, one to control and reward the dog and the other to hold the baby. The rapidity with which the procedures are carried out and the number of steps involved vary.

Depending upon the exuberance 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. You must use your 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 you are 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 your absence. The dog should be allowed as much freedom in the house and interaction with the adults as possible. Initially, when you prepare to interact with the baby in the dog's presence, you should also interact with the dog in some manner. You 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 you ask the dog to sit or stay but intermittent food rewards keep its performance level high.

There are no definite guidelines as to when a dog actually accommodates to an infant and perhaps begins recognizing it as a person. Most dogs probably adjust to the presence of 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), you can probably relax supervision of the dog in the presence of the child. This depends on the dog's history of aggression, particularly predatory behavior. While one cannot relax and be totally unconcerned after the dog has had several weeks of supervised interaction with the baby, it is unlikely that an unfortunate incident would occur after that time if the dog is non-aggressive, relaxed and relatively uninterested in the baby in supervised circumstances. If you are concerned, you may put a latched screen door on their baby's bedroom door or put up gates to prevent access to the child when you are not there.