

How to Prepare Your Dog for a Baby

Source: *Parents Magazine*, Shannon Greer

For many couples, a dog is their first “baby.” And chances are, your dog knows he is! Your canine will still be a cherished part of the clan when your son or daughter arrives on the scene, but your routines will shift, and that can befuddle your furry friend. Like babies, dogs thrive on predictability, and “a newborn dramatically changes not only your life but your dog’s as well,” says Victoria Stilwell, dog trainer and host of Animal Planet’s *It’s Me or the Dog*. Soon he’ll have to share your adoring attention with a demanding infant, and he won’t understand why the long walks he relishes are getting shorter. Don’t wait till Baby is home to help your pup adjust to the expanded fam. “While you’re pregnant, initiate changes to get him used to a new schedule,” Stilwell says. Put our plan into play and see Spot fall in love!

WHEN YOU FIND OUT YOU’RE EXPECTING:

If your dog hasn’t been to a basic obedience class, it’s time to sign him up. Behavior that seems innocuous now -- like jumping up to greet you at the door -- might become an issue when you’re eight months pregnant or carrying an infant in your arms. An instructor can help correct that.

Many dogs have never been around children before. Little people do unpredictable things that adults don’t, like make sudden movements, shriek, and get in dogs’ faces. To give your pet exposure to tots, take him to the park to see how he reacts to babies from a distance, Stilwell suggests. Ask mom friends if you may walk near them when they have their kiddo in a stroller -- or, if things go well, even alongside them. These tactics will gradually acclimate your dog to the sight and sound of children.

THREE MONTHS BEFORE YOUR DUE DATE:

Actively prep your pup for his future “sibling.” Though it may seem loony, get a doll and treat it as you will your infant. Carry it around at home, coo to it, and tote it in the baby carrier. Set up the bassinet, crib, and swing, and then have the doll “use” them. “You want the dog to become familiar with these items now, not when your baby is in them,” says Betsy Saul, cofounder of PetFinder.com, an online pet-search site. Let your dog investigate everything the way he does best -- by sniffing. “And introduce him to smells like baby lotion and powder,” Saul says.

Practice walking your dog while you’re pushing your future baby’s wheels. “Your neighbors may be puzzled, but this will help your dog get used to the stroller,” Saul says. Be sure not to loop the leash onto the stroller handle. If your furry friend happens to see a squirrel or another canine buddy, he might jerk the leash -- dangerous when there’s a baby tucked in the stroller! Forget the adage “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Try the “back” cue, which is an important skill for helping your pup learn about personal space, Stilwell says. Standing directly in front of your pooch, say “back” and hold out your hand as you shuffle toward him. He’ll



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naturally back up, and then you can reward him with a treat, such as praise, a pat on the head, or a small biscuit. Practice this cue throughout the next few months, gradually eliminating your forward movement, so you only have to lift your hand and say “back.” Consistency is key; your dog will eventually back up on his own, leaving Baby to enjoy your lap.

ONE MONTH BEFORE YOUR DUE DATE:

When you head to the hospital to deliver, you’ll be gone for a couple of days. Do you know who will be feeding your dog and walking him? “Line up sitters or close friends your pet knows and likes,” Saul says. “Enlist someone you can count on if you have to call at 3 a.m. to ask her to take your dog out later.” And have a back-up person on hand too.

Worried about juggling a newborn and your pet in the early days? You might want to sign up your pup for “doggie day care” and try it out now. A good center will have at least two attendants per ten dogs and keep the bully dogs from being aggressive toward others, Stilwell says.

CLOSER TO DELIVERY DAY – TWO WEEKS BEFORE YOUR DUE DATE:

Unless you’ve scheduled a cesarean section or induction, the delivery date is anyone’s guess, so have your dog’s ducks in a row. Divide his food into individual servings, jot down pertinent phone numbers (such as the vet’s) for the sitter, and keep the leash in a visible place. This way, if you have to head to the hospital suddenly, your pooch’s caregiver can find everything in a flash.

Once you’re gone, your pet may be anxious with the abrupt change in routine, so stash some goodies in advance. “Keeping him busy is crucial for his well-being and decreases the chance of behavioral problems,” says VetStreet.com dog trainer Mikkel Becker, who suggests Kong toys (rubber toys you fill with food). “They keep a dog focused on a productive outlet that releases energy in an acceptable way.”

ONE WEEK BEFORE YOUR DUE DATE:

You’re dealing with a thousand emotions right now (you’re excited, nervous, frazzled), and your pet, picking up on those feelings, may act out. Take a leisurely stroll if you’re up for it, or cuddle with him on the couch. The TLC will calm your canine and help you feel more relaxed and ready for the impending life shake-up too.



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WHILE YOU'RE IN THE HOSPITAL:

When your baby arrives and you're recovering from childbirth, your partner, a family member, or a friend should call the dog sitter to make sure she got into the house. Later, have Daddy or Grandma take home one of your baby's first bodysuits or blankets so your dog can get used to your child's smell, Saul says. By the time Baby comes home, your pooch will recognize and accept the strange new scent. "There's quite a difference between the initial sniff-down and a friendly recheck," Saul says.

COMING HOME:

Brace for lots of licks! Your pooch is going to be overjoyed to reunite with you. "Let your husband hold the baby when you walk into your house," Stilwell says. "Greet the dog first, since he's missed you and will probably give you an enthusiastic hello. Then, after he's chilled out, sit down with your baby and let your dog sniff him to get acquainted." The first few times you nurse or give your baby a bottle, ask your husband or mother to dole out a handful of small, special treats, like chicken tidbits, to your pet. "Dogs sense that nursing is intimate," Saul says. "If they learn they get rewarded for being tranquil, they'll associate feedings with positive times."

In the midst of all the newborn's demands, don't forget that exercise is your pup's happy pill. If he's not getting enough, he'll find a way to burn off his energy -- even if it means raiding the garbage! Have your partner (or a visitor) take your dog for a long walk each day. It will allow you QT with your munchkin and help Fido settle down. He may curl up for a nap as soon as he comes home!

FIRST WEEKS:

Your dog probably doesn't entirely grasp why the home life he knew is changing. With all the additional stimulation, he may get into more trouble than usual. Stilwell advises: "Rather than scold him and say, 'no, no, no,' all the time, teach him another choice. Redirect his behavior toward something that will make him happy." He's jumping on well-wishers? Remind him he has a new chew toy.

"Include your dog in baby-related activities," Becker says. Let him sit nearby when you're changing a diaper, and talk to both of your "babies" while you're at it. You'll give Rover attention and build Baby's language skills too. Eventually, your infant will go from being the stranger your dog is uncertain about to his favorite playmate and lifelong pal.



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KEEPING THE PEACE BETWEEN DOG AND BABY:

Yes, your babies (furry and not!) can live happily ever after. Try these pointers from Heidi Ganahl and Dacia Henshaw, of Camp Bow Wow, in Boulder, Colorado:

Zone Out: Install safety gates to designate some rooms as off-limits to your pooch. This way, Baby can perfect her rolling and crawling in peace.

Stock Up on Playthings: If your pup has his own stuff, he's less likely to chew on any cute baby toys you received as gifts.

Avoid Food Fights: Keep your dog's bowls on the counter when it's not mealtime. Once your child is mobile, she can create a mess of sloshed water (which also poses a drowning risk) or may sample the kibble (choking hazard). Plus, some dogs get territorial around chow.

Teach Your Baby to Be Gentle: As your tot begins exploring with her hands, she might grab Fido's fur. Show her how to pet nicely. She'll mimic Mommy -- and your dog will thank you.

Always Supervise: Never, ever leave your child alone with your pet. Infant behavior (squealing, a quick maneuver) could unexpectedly irritate him. And watch for pacing or unusual eye contact, which could indicate your dog isn't comfortable with the baby.