

# Infants, Children, and Dogs

## Preparing puppies for children

Preparation for a good relationship between the pet and children begins when the dog is a puppy. To accomplish this, there should be frequent opportunities for the young pup to meet children during its early months of life. In fact, up to 3 months of age, puppies are most social, and the experiences they have and the people they meet at this age can make a lifelong impression. However, ongoing positive exposures through to adulthood are also necessary to maintain healthy social relationships. Of course, genetics also plays a role in how a dog interacts with people and other animals.

Puppies should be introduced to children when they are calm and treats should be used to facilitate introductions. Puppy classes that encourage family attendance can be a way to meet children in a controlled environment. Early positive interactions help prevent the development of fear, avoidance behavior, and aggression toward children when the pet is older. Another concept the young pup needs to learn is that being touched by people can be a pleasant experience. However, the reality is that most pets will have some limits on when, how frequently, with whom, and the quality and type of contact that they will tolerate or enjoy.

All family members should make a point of gently and positively handling the puppy in all the ways that a child might touch it. Making positive associations (e.g., with treats or during play) while touching the tail, ears, and body, and grasping the collar as well as teeth brushing, grooming, and claw (nail) trimming should help the dog adapt to contact with all parts of the body, which might be similar to what might be encountered with a child. Any type of physical punishment, threats with a hand, or forceful interactions (e.g., pinning, roll over) should be avoided. All pets must learn that the human hand is friendly and not to be feared (i.e., associated with treats, receiving toys, and affection). If the pet associates hand movement with discomfort, it might bite when the child moves a hand toward it.

Some dogs show aggression when approached while they eat. This behavior might be avoided by teaching the young pup that it is good to have company at dinner time. A family member could occasionally sit on the floor with the puppy while it eats. During this time, treats can be intermittently added to the food bowl or offered to the puppy while eating. Combine this with gentle petting while giving the treats. The family can pick up pieces of kibble from the bowl, and hand feed them to the puppy. The bowl can also be periodically removed for few seconds, and a small piece of meat or cheese added and then the bowl placed back on the floor. Family members should occasionally drop a piece of meat or a chunk of canned food into the bowl as they walk by. By doing these exercises, the pup should look forward to having people nearby at meal times and that humans will not steal their food. However, if any of these exercises cause fear or apprehension, the action should cease and the family should seek veterinary guidance. Repeatedly taking the food bowl away while the pet is eating without a positive association (e.g., getting a special treat) will just irritate the pet and should be avoided.

## Preparing the adult dog for the new baby

The first thing to consider is the dog's temperament. All types of aggression should be considered potentially dangerous, especially if the dog growls or snaps when touched, disturbed while eating, playing with toys, or resting. If the dog exhibits any type of aggression this should be resolved before the baby arrives. Even if the dog gets along well with children, the child that inadvertently gets too close to a dog that exhibits territorial aggression may be injured. Young children are more likely to be bitten by family pets or familiar dogs than unfamiliar dogs with minimal provocation. Therefore, even if improvement is achieved, the family should be aware of any potential risks and have a practical and realistic understanding of the limits as to when and how the child should interact with the family dog.

As soon as the mother-to-be learns of her pregnancy, some thought should be given to preparing the dog for the inevitable changes. Dogs are likely to become anxious if the routine, environment, or the way the family interacts with the dog is changed or lacks predictability. Therefore gradual adjustments should be made before the baby arrives. Feeding, exercise, and play schedules, as well as sleeping and resting areas and any new routines or rules (e.g., rooms the dog is permitted to enter, furniture on which the dog is allowed to sleep, jumping up during greeting, barking at the window) will need to be put into place ahead of time to fit the family's situation once the baby is home.

If the family is consistent and predictable in their responses, the dog should quickly learn those behaviors that get rewards and those that do not. This is particularly important when giving attention. If the pet gets attention by nudging, head pressing, pawing, or licking, the family must stop rewarding these behaviors as they are not acceptable ways to get attention and could be problematic if the baby or child needs care or attention (e.g., carrying, changing, feeding). By consistently ignoring these behaviors and rewarding a desirable way of getting attention (e.g., a relaxed down) the dog should eventually cease the undesirable and offer the new calm behavior that gets the attention. The pet may initially be confused and frustrated and may escalate the behavior into more intense attention seeking that might include scratching, jumping up, barking, grabbing, or even biting. If the family even occasionally gives attention for these behaviors, they intermittently reward these more intense behaviors. Therefore, well before the baby arrives, the family should begin a program of structured interactions and predictable consequences (learn to earn), so that the pet learns that calm and

settled behaviors are the way to get rewards. This effectively puts the rewards (affection, eating, treats) under the dog's control by consistently and predictably training that only calm responses (sit/watch, down/stay, lying on its mat) will be rewarded. To teach the dog what is desirable, food lures, a head halter (which can be left attached with a leash dragging), and obedience commands can be used (if previously effectively trained), or just waiting and watching until the desired behavior is displayed and then immediately rewarding (clicker training can be particularly effective). If the family is consistent and predictable the pet should soon learn that these calm behaviors are the way to get attention.

Commands (cues) should be given prior to the pet's behavior (sit, focus, down and settle, or go to a mat or crate) and rewards timed to follow immediately the behavior that is being trained. Giving rewards inconsistently will delay training and add to the dog's confusion and anxiety about how to get what it wants, and may ultimately reward undesirable behaviors. Other behaviors that are permitted now, but won't be permitted when the baby is at home, must also be addressed (e.g., jumping up, barking at windows, lying on furniture, climbing into the lap) by training and rewarding desirable alternatives (e.g., sit for all greetings, rest on your mat).

The dog might also be prepared for the homecoming by exposing it to the noises and smells of the new baby. If the dog gets upset when it hears strange sounds, a recording of baby noises (e.g., cooing, crying, screaming) can be used in a desensitization and counter-conditioning program. The recording should first be played at sufficiently low volume that the dog shows no anxiety, while jovially requesting obedience commands for tasty food treats or some play time. Very gradually, the volume can be increased as the weeks go by until the pet seems comfortable with the noises at high volumes. A towel or blanket with the baby's scent can be taken home from the hospital to prepare the pet for the new smells that will arrive with the baby. The object should be presented while the dog is relaxed and taking treats or playing with a favored toy. Some dogs will be anxious when the parent is carrying or nursing the new baby. Testing the dog by carrying around and fussing with a doll (especially one that actually moves and makes crying sounds) can be useful. If there is any anxiety, a positive association should be made with this doll by giving the dog favored food rewards, affection, or a favored play toy whenever the doll is present.

### **When the baby comes home**

If the dog has not seen the mother for a day or two, there will probably be a great deal of excited greeting behavior when she arrives with the baby. Therefore, if someone else carries the baby into the home, the mother can greet the dog without worrying that it might accidentally scratch the baby. It is important to set the dog up to succeed by anticipating problems and taking steps to prevent them. By taking this approach, scolding, punishment, and anxious feelings associated with the presence of the baby can be prevented.

The family should wait until the excitement has died down and the pet is calm before introducing the dog to the baby. That may be later in the same day or a few days afterward. The dog should be brought to meet when calm and under good control. Careful judgment must be exercised in deciding when to allow the dog close enough to sniff. If there is a chance the dog might jump, use a leash. If more control is needed, a head halter and leash can be utilized. If there is *any* chance that the dog might bite, consider using a lightweight basket muzzle (or avoid the situation entirely). If it can be predicted that a head halter or muzzle is likely to be utilized, it would be best for the family to accustom the dog to wearing these before the arrival of the baby. The family should *never* (no matter how sweet, trustworthy, or friendly the pet appears) allow an unsupervised dog around the baby.

It is especially important to be vigilant when the baby is crying, kicking, or waving its arms. This could cause a curious dog to jump up and injure the infant. During these times, it is wise to train a desirable response, such as a "Down – stay" away from the baby and give favored rewards, or have the dog go to its room, mat, or yard with a special chew toy. The family should immediately seek additional guidance from a qualified behaviorist if there are any suspicions that the pet is exhibiting predatory signs (stalking, strong focus, unusual interest) around the baby.

Whenever the dog is in the room with the baby, the family should remain positive with one family member focused on taking the dog across the room and rewarding acceptable behaviors (e.g., calm, responding to commands, orienting to the baby in a calm manner) with treats, food, play, or affection. With success, the exercises should gradually be moved closer to the baby. The idea is to promote relaxed behaviors and to make the dog look forward to the baby's presence by giving favored rewards each time the dog sees or hears the baby. This association can be made more dramatic by reducing the amount of attention or treats the dog gets when the baby is not around. In this way, the dog learns that the presence of the baby is associated with positive events, and the absence of the baby is not. The biggest mistake families make when they try to shape the dog's behavior is to concentrate on telling the dog what is wrong, instead of rewarding what is right.

## As children grow up

As the baby continues to grow and mature, the dog will be exposed to a variety of new stimuli from crawling to toddling to walking, and even trying to approach or take things away from the dog. Even if the dog has adapted nicely to a particular stage in the child's life, the family must always be prepared for a change in the relationship between the child and pet. Interactions between dogs and young children should always be supervised. The spontaneous, active behavior of children is exciting for most dogs, and might elicit rough play, chase, or anxiety. Encouraging the child to give tasty food rewards to the pet for responding to "Sit" commands is a simple way to teach the pup to keep its paws on the ground and expect good things whenever it is around children.

An important thing to remember is that children are great imitators. Family members must not do anything to the pet that they do not want the child to do. This includes hugging, physical punishment, teasing, and rough play. Children don't know how to interact with animals, so they must be taught how to approach, handle, and play with the pet. For example, fetch is a great game for the child and dog to share. While some dogs will tolerate physical contact, the child will be safer if taught to avoid making contact around the eyes, ears, and head, and to pat the dog along its side. Hugging, getting face to face, and lifting are not well tolerated by some dogs and are best avoided. In fact, young children are more likely to be bitten on the face or head; boys in the age range of 5 – 9 are at highest risk, and most dog bites in young children are by the family dog, in contexts of resource guarding, or benign interactions such as hugging or petting. The dog should be physically confined away from the child (e.g., dog in crate or secure room, child in playpen, crib, or own room) so that an adult can supervise each approach and ensure that the dog is comfortable with the interaction. Be particularly careful about security and safety (and seek a behaviorist's guidance) if the dog ever growls, threatens, or shows active avoidance when it is sleeping, resting, or handled. Never punish or force affection on a dog that resists. This could lead to increased aggression or could suppress the growling behavior so that the pet no longer warns, but may still bite, when it wants to be left alone.

Children should have some degree of positive control over the pet and this can begin at a relatively early age. Once the child is talking, a family member can hold the child in the lap and teach the pet to sit when the child gives a command and drops a treat on the floor as a reward. This can be done by coaching the child to say the command word at the same time as the adult. Gradually, the adult can phase out the command and the child can give the command alone. This can also be done with other commands. When the child is old enough, it can be taught the same rule structure as the adults so that the dog consistently learns to lie down or sit calmly before giving it things that it wants (toys, treats, play). Nonaggressive pets can be taught to look forward to having the child present while they eat if an adult carries the child and has it toss small pieces of food in or near the bowl.

Children must also learn rules about other pets. The most important rule is that the child must *never* touch another family's pet or give it food unless an adult gives permission. Dogs on a leash, by food, by toys, sleeping, tied down, or running loose should never be approached. All family members must also follow these rules as a model for the child's behavior. Children must be taught to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous behaviors. The family should review aggressive postures (growling, loud barking, hair standing on end) and fearful behaviors (trembling, crouching, ears back, tail tucked) so that the child learns to avoid these animals. If the child is approached by a dog that is acting aggressively, the child should stand very still like a tree, say nothing, hold the arms against the body, and avoid eye contact. If the child is on the ground or knocked down, he or she should curl into a tight ball, cover the ears with his or her fists, and remain still and quiet until the animal moves far away. Some excellent references are available, such as [dogscatskids.com](http://dogscatskids.com), [bluedog.com](http://bluedog.com), [doggonessafe.com](http://doggonessafe.com), [bowwowow.com](http://bowwowow.com), and [growingupwithpets.com](http://growingupwithpets.com).