

Before the New Baby Comes Home

Parents are wise to think ahead about how they will manage the dog they have now with the baby they have coming. The earlier you start to prepare your home and your dog for the upcoming joyous event, the better.

Get the House Ready

Decide how your house will be arranged to manage the care of a baby and a dog. Keep in mind the rule on which experts agree: no child under school age should ever be left alone with any dog, for even one second. You will need attentive adult supervision at all times whenever dog and child are able to make contact. Initially you should have a competent adult handling the dog and another handling the baby. It depends on how things go whether and when it might become feasible to have just one adult supervising them both.

Set up barriers that will keep your particular dog in or out of specific rooms. Sometimes one baby gate is enough, but for some dogs you'll need to stack one gate above another and/or use other types of barriers. Think ahead to when the baby starts walking and you'll need to keep the little one from intruding on the dog's space without supervision. Set up your barriers according to how you'll need to care for the dog and the child.

Start the New Routine

Get a baby doll and some of the various items you'll use for baby care. Role-play the baby care around the dog, deciding how you need the dog to behave while you perform baby care tasks. Teach the dog these behaviors using a reward-based method.

Figure out what your routine with your dog can be after the baby comes. Chances are it will be different than it has been. Change the routine now. You don't want the dog to associate huge changes in life--some of which may make the dog less than happy--with the coming of the new baby.

Evaluate the Dog

Have your dog evaluated by an expert. Your veterinarian may be able to recommend a behavior specialist in your area. This step may not be necessary if your dog has spent extensive time in the homes of babies and young children and also having them come to your home, and shown only safe behaviors. Still, the help of such an expert with methods to teach the dog the desired behaviors around a new baby could be priceless for even the gentlest of dogs.

Train

Dog training is a two-way skill. The handler has to be trained just as the dog does. Each skill has to be structured. What exactly is your command going to be and exactly what does the dog need to do when you give the command? This earliest stage is where a lot of do-it-yourself training falls apart! With a new baby coming your time is short, so don't mess around. Unless you are a skilled trainer, seek skilled help for yourself and your dog.

The next step is ample practice that is spread out over time. It might seem that you have learned a new skill and taught it to your dog in just a weekend, but reliable learning takes longer than that. This is an important part of the reason to change your routine with the dog now and to rehearse the baby care now. You and the dog need time and practice to form new habits, habits that each of you will carry out without thinking by the time the baby comes.

The third step in the process is to introduce the unexpected. Distractions, excitement, and other things can interfere with the reliable carrying out of the commands. Rehearse these things and help yourself and your dog learn to respond **EVEN BETTER** when they happen. In your case, if you've followed the first two steps carefully, you know what you are going to do and you know why, and you have some trained habits to help you. In the dog's case, there is the teamwork the two of you have created, the reward system you've established (more on that in a second) and those precious habits you've put in the time to establish. Emergencies do arise in baby care! When there is an emergency is when you need to be the best dog handler of your life, and for your dog to give the best response to commands. Train for this!

Step four is that any other adult or older child in the family needs to learn to handle the dog correctly on the commands, too! A dog is not a robot that gets programmed with training and then should respond to anyone who says the magic word. Training is a relationship you must build through time spent with the dog. Each person who expects to be able to use the dog's training must put in the practice time.

Your dog will need to know how to Come when Called, Walk on a Loose Leash (no pulling), Sit-Stay (unless sitting is painful to the dog, in which case you can use a Down in its place), Down-Stay, Settle (calmly lie down, but free to leave as long as it's not to come back and stick a nose into what you're doing), keep feet on the ground when greeting people, keep teeth off human skin, accept touch on any part of the body, and give to you anything the dog has in the mouth.

Reward, Reward, Reward

Some problems dogs have with kids happen because of uptight adults without a good training plan. Your plan is for the dog to love this child and think that good things come of this child being part of the family. Let's think about this for a minute. If you start your training by yelling at the dog for touching the child with a questioning nose--or yelling at the dog for anything else in the presence of a child--what is the dog's new perception? "Child=Bad Thing!" This is exactly what you DON'T want.

Beginning with your new household arrangements, with your role-playing of baby care and with your new training of the dog, use rewards the dog loves. If your dog tends to snap at treats and pose a hazard to the fingers offering them, now is the time to teach the dog to take treats gently. You'll want your child to eventually be able to give treats to the dog. Gently bumping the dog's nose when the dog grabs too roughly at the treats is one method. Another is to push the treat into the dog's mouth more abruptly and deeper than the dog had in mind. Don't make this a painful or upsetting experience to the dog, just a gentle reminder.

Use other things the dog enjoys for rewards, too, but don't try to avoid including food rewards. These treats need to be tiny and easily swallowed, and of course the calories and the food ingredients must be acceptable to your dog's dietary needs. "Earning" part of the daily food is healthy for dogs. Feed your dog at least twice a day, and it's fine to divide the daily food into smaller meals and feed even more frequently. Just keep the amount at a healthy level.

Food rewards allow you to deliver that "AttaBoy!" or "AttaGirl!" precisely at the moment and in the situation you want to reinforce. Other games such as retrieving and other rewards such as walks and rides in the car are great for training in some situations, but right now you're looking for rewards you can deliver while also tending a baby. Using food effectively for reward is an important training skill that takes time and practice to master, so don't lose this chance to work on it.

After Baby is Born

It helps for someone to bring in things with the baby's scent for the dog to smell. Associate those things with the routines you've established in role-playing and practicing baby care. Reward the dog for following the commands in these situations around this scent. This is a new twist for the dog, and you want the dog to see it as a good thing! When you bring the baby home, consider having mom come in to greet the dog without the baby first. When you do bring the baby in, keep it low-key. Use your routines that you have established, and let the dog see that these comfortable habits will still be in place. Reward the dog in the presence of the baby. At first, have two adults paying attention when dog and baby are together.

When Baby Starts to Crawl

When a baby gets mobile enough and strong enough to push on a dog, pull on a dog, lay on a dog, poke fingers into a dog's eyes and ears and more--don't let your baby do these things! Don't be one of those parents who boasts that YOUR dog will "let the baby do ANYTHING" and will never complain.

Every dog has limits. Don't let the baby push these limits. The child will be too young to have the brain development to internalize the concept of empathy until around school age. Until that time, never leave your child and your dog alone together, and always govern what your child does toward your dog. Don't ever put a dog into the position of having to set limits on the child's behavior. That's a parent's job.