

Introducing Your Dog to Your Newborn

Many of us have our dog-children before we have our human children and we love both equally. As such, it is important to help our dogs adjust to some big upcoming changes in their routines. With proper preparation, this can be a **smooth and fun process**.

Some important things to do before you become pregnant and most certainly before the arrival of your baby are to get your dog (all pets for that matter) up to date with his **health exam**, vaccinations and deworming schedule with your veterinarian.

After that, get started with some **training**. Unfortunately many of us treat our dogs like people because we VALUE them like people. Trust me; your dog will be happier if he is in fact treated like a **dog**. Now he needs to learn some rules BEFORE the baby arrives....and you have 9 months to make it routine!

Firstly, establish a strong foundation of **obedience training**. There is nothing more helpful than a good sit-stay or down-stay when you walk through the door or down some stairs with an armful of baby, diaper bag and groceries! Teach your dog sit, stay, come, down, off, gentle (with your teeth!), drop (that thing), be quiet and crate training. Get professional help to make this a positive and successful experience. Learn how to use these tools for a long time **before** the baby comes so that they become habits for everyone.

Secondly, **socialize** your dog to kids and babies **now**. **Slowly, peacefully and positively** acclimate your dog to the sights, sounds and activities of children of all ages. Go for walks near school yards and parks. Get him used to strollers and screaming...etc...at and away from home. Use food and all other types of rewards to reinforce desirable reactions to these awful stimuli. Children are darling (little scary monsters). Never scold or punish the dog for fearful or aggressive behaviour. Instead, divert his attention and firmly but gently lead him away, while calmly saying "Dog's name OUT". Regain his eye contact and focus before returning for another try with a greater distance from the child. Have him sit calmly for a few seconds, reward, and then leave. Repeat this again and again, in short sessions with several breaks until he is no longer afraid. If a more gradual approach is needed, consider sound desensitization recordings to acclimate your dog to certain sounds at initially low volumes before trying to introduce him to the sights and touches.

Thirdly, learn how to use **canine calming signals**. Use them and reinforce them in your dog. They are your dog's natural form of peaceful communication and likely the single most important training tool there is. Because the discussion of canine calming signals is beyond the scope of this handout, please refer to the book "On Talking Terms With Dogs: Canine Calming Signals" by Turid Rugaas. It is available at www.carolark.com, Amazon and other larger bookstores.

In addition, introduce your dog to all of the new rules and routines involving your new baby. We must be fair to our dogs and not expect them to just know not to do things like bite the kid who screamed in his face or jump on top of the baby who is lying on the floor. Consider the following:

- Use a **doll** which has the scent of a real infant and dress it in real diapers. Regard the doll as you would your real baby.
- Establish all of **the boundaries** for the dog using the doll. Place the “baby” on a blanket on the floor to establish a distinct dog-free zone. Place the dog in a sit or down-stay at a 3 to 4 foot distance from the zone and use calm gentle praise. Read a book or do some ironing etc. while your dog maintains the stay. Keep the sessions initially brief. Perform sessions where the dog maintains the stay while you do things on the blanket with the baby (lay down, giggle and play, change diaper....) Play baby sound recordings to bump up the level of difficulty for the dog. If he breaks the stay, gently correct him and replace him in the stay immediately. As always with training, give your dog frequent breaks and keep new levels of learning brief and successful.
- Establish a **routine** for your dog with mandatory quiet times balanced by appropriate times and locations for all-out fun! Don’t forget that both parents should be bonding with the dog to help remove the burden from the other parent. Provide him with good outlets for venting the breed-specific drive he may have, such as tug-of-war for German Shepherds and Jack Russel Terriers or tracking and digging/baying for beagles.
- **Get barking on cue!** There is nothing more frustrating than trying to get stuff done during that golden hour when the baby sleeps! Your dog will destroy this opportunity for you with a single knock on the front door. “The Culture Clash” by Jean Donaldson has an excellent “Be Quiet!” game to help you learn this VALUABLE tool!
- Train your dog to walk on a **loose-lead** beside the stroller so you can comfortably continue to enjoy your new routines together.
- Regarding sound recordings, play them at gentle volumes initially. Praise your dog for having no reaction at all. If he seems alarmed, **use Calming Signals** like yawning, sitting down to relax or quietly turn to another room walking in parallel with your dog. This will teach him that this sound is nothing to fear. Fear leads to stress and stress results in aggression.
- Teach your dog that certain furniture and toys etc. are off limits. Scent mark baby things with baby powder and dog things with peanut butter to help your dog clearly discriminate between articles. Teach him **“off (drop or no)” and “take it (yes)” exercises** using the scented items to help coach him on the difference. “The Culture Clash” by Jean Donaldson is a great book which describes this exercise well.
- Teach your dog to **sit and wait at entryways**, doors and stairwells. There is nothing more dangerous than a rude dog barreling under foot while you have arms full with baby and supplies. This exercise requires patience and persistence, but it is fun. With a hungry dog and tiny treats ready, sit your dog at your side in front of a boring doorway (bedroom) and say “wait”. If he breaks the sit, use your WHOLE BODY to block him, not your hands. Dogs respect body language and a hip-check is very effective with dogs. They do it to each other all the time. This process may look like a bit of a dance if the dog insists upon trying to pass through the doorway. You will be moving your whole body left to right, avoiding the use of your hands.

Turn and walk into him if he persists, reminding him of your request to “sit”. If he does not try to move out of the sit, toss a few treats or a toy into the room in order to tempt him to move. It may have to be a person ready to call him in. When he does move, body block, “sit” and give massive praise and rewards. If there are treats on the floor in the room, give better ones on the correct side of the door while he maintains the sit. If you are using a toy, have an equal or better one on the correct side of the door or have the person approach him for a pat while maintaining the sit. Give him the release word of your choice (“free dog”) AFTER you enter the room first. He may take the treats and toy, but do not praise or give him fun access to the other person. The idea is that it must be MORE motivating to remain on the correct side of the door until you say otherwise. As you progress with this exercise, increase the level of difficulty with different doorways (like the front door! The most exciting door in the world!) Eventually pretend to do this with your doll and baby stuff to mimic the real thing.

An important thing I have learned over the years is **that not all dogs are going to adjust** to the presence of children. Sometimes, for the safety of our kids, we need to find a new home for our pets. A lot of dogs show signs of difficulty when the baby reaches 5 or 6 months, right as the infant begins to move around and grab at our dogs. To the dog, the baby is now an obvious and confusing threat. This threat escalates as the child grows into a walking toddler. Part of the time kids behave like predators, grabbing, chasing and taking things from the dog, while the other part of the time, they behave like prey, running, writhing and squealing. These behaviours from your baby will trigger deep instincts within your dog which can **never** be trained out of him. Like it or not, our Shih Tzus, Labradors and Pit bulls are nothing more than **highly social predators**. It is foolish to disregard this important fact. As such, it is our responsibility to provide our dogs with as much help as we can.

If your dog shows any sign of stress (and these can be very subtle, so pay attention) upon the approach of a child, teach him the **“out” option**. Keep your dog on leash at first. Upon the first sign of stress during an interaction, gently lead him away saying “your dog’s name, out”. Remove him from the room. Here, he can do whatever he likes, he just needs to learn that there is another option....which is **leave** when he feels worried. Repeat this over and over. The goal is that you can simply say “out” to get him to leave if you have any doubts about how he may be feeling...or he may just do it on his own. Provide ample praise and rewards for these correct responses. The rewards should be neutral to good in the new location, but the reward should **be good to fantastic the instant he makes to leave**. It is important that he has a completely baby-free zone which is inaccessible to children (a crate, closet, spare bedroom etc...). Don’t forget to reward your dog for calm and desirable behaviour with the baby...this is **most important**. **Never scold a dog for growling** as this is a gracious and fair warning we must all learn to respect. Remove the dog from the stimuli, and then restart some desensitization later. When the “stimuli” (the kid) is old enough to understand, they too will need to learn some respect for that growl. Better yet, the child should learn to respect the more subtle and peaceful calming signals from the dog, which ask politely for the child **to lay off**.



This handout is not an exhaustive source of information. There is much to learn, so I recommend reading books using positive reinforcement techniques to help child-proof your dog. My favourite book is “The Culture Clash” by Jean Donaldson. She does not speak specifically about dogs and kids, but she writes a great chapter on socializing your dog to various stimuli. To a dog, kids are just stimuli.

The following are handouts to complement the information here:

“Counterconditioning”

“Systematic Desensitization”

“The Golden Rules for Training”

“Rules for Clicker Training”

“Bite Inhibition Exercise”

“The Sit”

“The Quiet Down”