



APBC

ASSOCIATION OF PET
BEHAVIOUR COUNSELLORS

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
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Is Your Dog Ready For Your Baby And Toddler?

Introduction

As a pet behaviourist and mother of two, I know that juggling kids and dogs is no easy feat. Yet with a little help you can make life easier – and safer – for your children and your pets.

Becoming parents is a momentous time in our lives, but it can also be stressful. New babies change everything – our routines, our homes, our sleep... Then just as you're adjusting to parenthood, your little one begins to crawl and before you know it you have a willful toddler on your hands with a volcanic temper. It's stressful for us – so how is it from a dog's perspective? And more importantly, what can we do to help make the transition as smooth as possible?

Preparation is key

In the months leading up to the arrival of a new baby adjust your dog to the sights, sounds and smells associated with infants. Your neighbours might think you've gone into early labour, but these simple techniques can really work:

- Carry a doll around the house wrapped in a blanket.
- Have cots, car seats and baby bouncers around the house.
- Play YouTube clips of babies crying (quietly to start with).
- Go for a walk with the pram.
- Teach your dog to sniff the feet of the doll rather than the face.
- Distinguish the dog's own toys from the baby's.
- Create a safe area where your dog can be separate from the baby. Baby gates are ideal for safe segregation, whilst preventing the dog from feeling totally shut out.
- Practice short separations from your dog while you are home but in another room. Provide activity feeders to keep your dog occupied and to create a positive association with segregation.

Never use this safe area as a punishment.

- Introduce items that have baby scent (such as baby wipes, nappies, creams etc).

It's important that your dog remains relaxed whilst you're doing these practices. If at any point your dog appears stressed or unsure, stop what you are doing and make it easier (e.g. play the noises at a lower volume). The idea is that you want to use these preparatory training sessions to teach your dog how to behave around the baby and not be stressed by the alterations to their life.

First introductions

The first day your baby is brought home or introduced to your dog, each parent should greet the dog first without the baby. This is particularly important if there has been a stay in hospital – your dog might not have seen you for a few days and will be excited to see you. You will smell differently (and might be walking differently...). If there's a chance to take some of the baby's



worn vests/babygros home to let the dog smell before the baby is brought home, this will help provide olfactory information. Once your dog is calm, bring the baby into the house in the car seat (rather than holding it). Place the car seat somewhere your dog can see and smell it but can't reach it (the other side of a gate or safely on a surface), and reward your dog for coming away from the baby.

New routines

As you start to settle into life with a new baby, you'll be making use of the dog's safe space that you created before life changed. Ensure you continue to make this space a positive area – stuff 'Kongs' with canned dog food and keep them in the freezer, ready to give the dog whenever you need to pop them away.

Teach your dog what you would like them to do, rather than telling them what you don't want. For example, ask them to sit when they are next to you and the baby and reward them for responding, or ask them to lie on a mat or go to their safe space. This

is far clearer to the dog than telling them to “go away!” or “stop licking”! If your dog picks up a toy that doesn't belong to them, don't snatch it off them or tell them off, which may increase stealing and guarding behaviours. Teach a calm “leave” or do a swap with your dog. Make sure you praise them when they pick up their own toys.

On the move

All dogs rely on body language and predictable behaviour for a stress-free life. A baby's body language changes dramatically once they start to crawl. These inquisitive and erratic little humans are now on the floor sharing the space that was previously reserved just for animals! Your baby is down at your dog's eye level which may be perceived as a threat. Typically babies want to grab the dog or reach toward them and crowd the dog's space. They are intrusive and meddlesome! This can be very unsettling for even the most relaxed of dogs.

Has anyone explained this new development to the dog? How is a dog supposed to know that an approaching eye-level baby is not a threat? Dogs need to rely on adults in the home to give them guidance at these times.

Let's look at ways to help your dog as you all adjust to life with a baby on the move:

1. The dog's safe space is strictly a NO BABY zone. Be proactive rather than reactive in its use. Use it when feeding the dog or giving any treats or chews, so the baby cannot get access to the dog. Equally when the toddler is given a snack, place the dog in its safe space. But don't totally isolate the dog from the family.
2. Don't allow your baby to approach the dog – invite your dog over to you and your baby and listen to the dog if they choose not to approach. This is particularly important if the dog is resting or sleeping.
3. Help your dog out of potentially difficult situations. Dogs don't always move away from situations that make them uncomfortable. Sometimes they might feel

trapped or cornered, or conflicted because they don't want to leave the area where they were happily sleeping. Dogs will put up with a certain amount because they would like to be with the adults, but perhaps not the baby. If a dog feels like he can't or doesn't want to move away, the next behavioural option is usually aggression. As a dog ages, hearing and eyesight often deteriorate so they are more easily startled and they don't have the chance (or ability, if they are stiffer and arthritic) to move themselves away from difficult situations. Give your dog a positive warning signal and then call the dog away before the dog feels uncomfortable. If your dog moves away, prevent your child from following.

4. Don't allow hugging, kissing, sitting on, ear or tail pulling, or putting faces close to the dog's – these are all behaviours that dogs find either threatening or uncomfortable and will build a negative association with the baby. Do not expect a dog to tolerate a child's behaviour.

When enough is enough

You might think your dog is fine with a cheeky toddler playing affectionately with his face - I frequently hear the phrase “MY dog would never bite!” But more often than not dogs show body language signals that they are not fine. These subtle signs are usually misunderstood and consequently ignored (“Aww look! Fido is kissing my DD!” In actual fact a dog licking a person's face is attempting to communicate: “I'm not sure about you or this situation we're in!”). The dog then learns to escalate their behaviour over time until they reach a behavioural response we naturally react to. It often seems like this unwanted response came out of the blue when in actual fact the dog was giving warning signs for a long time.

Obviously it is vital that parents supervise all interactions between the dog and child, and when supervision is not possible they are separated. However, in the majority of cases when a family dog has bitten the child, the parent watched it

happen. The problem was not lack of supervision - the parent just doesn't know what they should be watching.

Parents usually receive no education on dog body language before having a baby or getting a new dog. There is little understanding of the cues that indicate a dog may resort to biting.

Improving supervision skills

- Watch for loose body language. A happy dog is relaxed and wiggly. Stiffening and freezing in a dog are warning signs. If you see your dog tense his body, or if he moves from panting to holding his breath (he stops panting), or if his tail goes from wagging to still, you should intervene. These are signs that your dog is not comfortable.
- Watch for stress signals in your dog, such as yawning (outside the context of waking up); lip licking (outside the context of eating food); sitting or standing with a front paw raised; trembling; rolling over; and looking away from the child with whites of the eye showing. A shake-off will also happen after the dog has experienced a difficult situation (similar to when the dog is wet and is shaking the water from their coat) – this is the doggy way of saying “PHEW! That was close!” So use that observation to determine what your dog found tricky and how you can prevent it happening in a similar future situation.
- If your dog starts to develop any discomfort or pain (e.g. arthritis, ear infections etc), their threshold for tolerating such behaviours will be much lower. Imagine when we have a headache or chronic backache – we tend to be far more irritable than when we are feeling fit and well.

It takes patience, understanding and careful supervision but with help and perseverance you CAN keep your baby safe and your dog happy.