

## **AND BABY MAKES ONE TOO MANY?**

The arrival of a baby is a wonderful and joyous occasion for a family, but there is one member of the household- the family pet-who might need some special attention and understanding to help it cope with the new addition.

Most pets will need some extra attention when a family introduces a new baby to the order of the home. Dogs in particular may find it confusing and invasive when a new ‘member of the pack’ enters the scene. A dog socializes in linear packs, which means it considers some family members as dominant to its own position and others as submissive. Initially, a dog probably sees the new baby in a lower pack order and may display dominant behavior. Watch for signs of aggression such as growling, ears down or laid back over the head, and crouching. Dogs that form deep bonds with their owners may also become depressed and stop eating.

Cats are less social than dogs and may choose to ignore the baby altogether. They do not socialize in packs, so they have little need to show aggression. For them, the most annoying part of living with children is being bothered, although some cats form very close bonds with their owners and may feel rejection. Cats may also stop eating. If you observe aggressive behaviors in your pets, quickly correct them, but do not punish. Serious or lingering behavior problems should always be discussed with your veterinarian.

Before bringing baby home from the hospital, expectant parents should allow their family pets to go into the baby’s room and investigate the crib and other new furniture. If there are baby powders or other smells that the pets will eventually associate with the baby, let them explore the scents. It is probably best, however, to keep your pets out of the room after the baby is home. Carefully allow your pets to see and smell your baby. Parents who panic and pull the child away when a dog or cat approaches are possibly sending the message that the baby is a threat.

Plan to spend time with your pets. Let them know they have not been replaced in the household. Pets may fear abandonment or rejection when the focus is switched to the new baby. Plan to take regular walks or have a game of fetch with your dog, or play favorite games with your cat. Give them personal time, just you and them.

Even with these precautions, some pets may never get used to children. Like people, they either accept children or they don’t. If a pet is raised around kids, generally there will be no great behavior problem. If the pet has not seen a “little person” before, you may have to closely supervise the interaction for awhile. Also, if you have a pet that has been teased or mistreated by a child in the past, there will be significant obstacles to overcome.

As your children get older, it is imperative they learn how to respect and treat the family pet. They should know that pets feel pain and get lonely when no one is around just like people do. Praise your children for gentleness and correct them for rough and unkind behaviors toward your pets. Children should also learn that dogs naturally chase, herd, catch, and fetch. Playfully grabbing a tail or running in the yard may be a dog’s invitation to chase and jump-a very natural response for a dog.

Remember, in many instances, your pets were your “babies” first. They don’t really understand what is happening. Find ways to show them you love them just as much as always. Take quiet walks or hang out in the yard on a cool summer evening. Make meal times special times to be with you. A little bit of affection goes a long way toward making your furry family members happy.

