

Ask A Vet: Is Your Dog Ready for the New Baby

Sunday, August 3, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My husband and I are expecting our first baby in about a month. We have two dogs that have been our babies up until now, and we are concerned about the transition of a new family member. Do you have any advice?

-Concerned Reader

Dear Reader,

This is a real concern and one that I am asked about frequently. According to experts, we are currently in somewhat of a baby boom. At the same time, it is ever popular for our dogs to truly be a part of our families. The transition of a new baby should be the beginning of a wonderful friendship. Watching my own children interact with our dogs is incredibly heartwarming. However, bad experiences do happen and it is important to keep several things in mind.

Before the baby arrives:

I think you must first ask yourself a few important questions about your dog: Does your dog aggressively guard toys, food, or treats? Does your dog have a strong predatory drive towards other animals or pets? Has your dog ever bitten you or any other person for any reason? In my mind if you answered yes to any of these questions it raises some red flags and you need to exercise extreme caution during the transition period. If this is the case I would recommend talking to a professional trainer or behaviorist before bringing your newborn home.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do ahead of time is work on basic training and obedience with your dog. Not only does this come in handy in being able to control your pet around your child but it also reaffirms the proper roles within the "pack". You are not just a member of your dogs pack but the leader. Dogs require that structure and organization within their family unit, and they will be happier as a result. One of the most important obedience points is to control "jumping up" on people or children. This can be dangerous for a newborn being held or sleeping in a swing, even if the dog means no harm. To remedy this, teach your dog an alternative behavior such as "sit" when the desire to jump would normally be there. Another thing to consider is getting your pet spayed or neutered if it is not already. This can decrease unpredictable or territorial behavior from both male and female dogs. If your dog is sensitive to noise it may also be a good idea to play recordings of babies crying at different volumes to desensitize them to this particular noise.

Introducing the baby:

Here are some basic tips that may help with that initial meeting: First introduce a blanket or article of clothing from the newborn, this will familiarize your dog with the baby's scent prior to their meeting.

Mother should first greet the dog empty handed without baby to spend a few minutes of quality time.

Dog should be leashed with two adults present, one in charge of dog and one in charge of baby

Stay positive and upbeat with your voice and body language

Introduce pets one at a time before all at once

Allow your dog to smell the baby and wait for him to become relaxed in its presence

If your pet shows intense focus on the baby or displays unusual excitement or arousal, separate them immediately and consult a professional before another attempt

Never leave your new baby unattended with your pet and it is a good idea to have a sturdy pet or baby gate

In my experience, having pets around is invaluable for all involved. In most cases, dogs accept infants as part of the family very quickly and a special friendship ensues that will be very important to both your child and pet.

-Dr. Justin Sellon