

# Animal Medical Center

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## Children and Pets – Infants and Dogs

One of the most common questions asked by an expectant parent or grandparent to a veterinary healthcare provider is how to introduce the family dog to a new infant, particularly if the dog has not been exposed to children before. The vast majority of dogs readily accept infants after an initial period of adjustment and curiosity. However, there are rare but highly publicized incidents involving serious injury of an infant by the family dog. These are general suggestions for making the introduction of a new baby to an existing dog safer and easier for everyone. There are many different theories and tactics for introducing a dog to a new baby so be sure to discuss this with your veterinarian long before your new baby arrives.

### Is there any way to predict if a dog will harm an infant or young child?

There are three types of behavior in dogs which parents should be particularly concerned about:

1. Dogs that have already shown aggressive tendencies towards babies or children.
2. Dogs that have demonstrated aggression toward adults.
3. Dogs that have a history of predatory behavior (i.e., they chase and kill squirrels, birds, cats, goats, sheep or other mammals).

If you have a dog with any of these behaviors, you need to consult with a board-certified veterinary behaviorist for advice on if and how you should introduce your dog to your new child. A visit to an animal behaviorist doesn't mean that you have a "bad" dog; it is simply a method to make this major adjustment easier for you and your pet and to prevent any harm to a newborn child. Many veterinary behaviorists require a referral from a veterinarian.

### My dog is well trained and has never shown any aggressive tendencies. Is it still necessary to take precautions?

Fortunately, most dogs look upon a baby with curiosity and interest and will show no signs of aggression or other negative behavior. However, some dogs may perceive an infant as a strange mammal or even a potential item of prey.

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Dogs that have never seen a baby may not view them as human beings. To help prevent accidents, even with a normal, non-aggressive family dog, some basic precautions should be taken.



## What are these basic precautions?

The dog should be properly obedience trained, ideally through a formal training class. For best results, obedience training should have been part of the dog's early upbringing. In all cases, training should begin long before the baby is born.

In order, the steps that should be followed are:

1. Make sure that the dog will obey basic sit, down, and stay commands in a distracting environment.
2. Simulate activities that will occur once the baby is present in the house.
3. Introduce the dog to the scent of the new baby before bringing the infant home.
4. Bring the new baby into the house while the dog is confined.
5. Allow the dog to see but not get near the baby during the first visit.
6. Allow the dog to approach the baby under close supervision.
7. Allow the dog to roam freely through the house in the presence of the baby while being closely supervised by adults.

## Why and how should I make sure the dog obeys basic commands?

Because the parents will want the dog to be quiet and under control when the baby is near, the dog should sit or lie down on command, and remain that way unless permitted to get up. It should be taught to "stay", remaining calm at all times. The commands "sit" and "stay" should never be associated with punishment.

If necessary, begin by teaching your dog to sit and stay for food rewards, such as a piece of dog biscuit or carrot. Gradually, substitute praise or petting for treats. For specific instructions on training your dog, see "Puppy training – Sit, Down, Stand and Stay", and other related handouts in our Behavior Series.

## How do I simulate activities associated with a baby?

After the dog has proven that it can remain seated while you do other activities, you should begin simulating activities that will occur when the baby arrives in the home. While the dog is in a sit/stay position, carry around a doll wrapped in the blankets that the baby will use, rock the doll in your arms, let the dog look at the doll while remaining in a sit/stay position, pretend to diaper the doll, etc.



"...to get a recording of some of the sounds that are commonly made by babies."

To get the dog accustomed to the new noises, you may even want to get a recording of some of the sounds that are commonly made by babies. After a time, get other people to engage in these activities in the dog's presence, and provide rewards for sitting and remaining calm. A firm "no" with an immediate "sit/stay" command is appropriate if the dog begins to get up when it should not. If the dog fails to follow instructions, it may be time to revisit training. At no time should you berate the dog with threats or hit it for getting up. The idea is to avoid associating punishment with these activities. You and the dog should look at these practice sessions as fun games and not as discipline exercises.

## How can I introduce my dog to the scent of the new baby?

After the baby is born but before bringing her into the house, some of the infant's clothing or blankets should be brought home to allow the dog to become familiar with the baby's scent. Initially, the dog should be permitted to sniff and smell the items as much as it wishes. Later, you should have the dog sit and stay as you pick up and put down these items, carry them into the baby's room, etc.

## What should we do the first time the baby is brought into the house?

When the mother returns from the hospital, the dog should be allowed to greet her without the baby present. This may require confining the dog to a separate room or crate until the mother can put the baby down for a few minutes. Only after the dog has greeted the mother and calmed down should the baby be presented to the dog. Sometimes it is a good idea to keep the dog and baby separate for several hours, while allowing the dog to sniff more items of clothing and become aware that the baby is in the house. This way, the dog can begin to get used to the baby being in the house and adjust to the new sounds and odors without actually being close enough to investigate it.

## Exactly how should I introduce the dog to the baby?

**"The best time to introduce a baby to a dog is when the dog is calm and the baby is quiet."**

The best time to introduce a baby to a dog is when the dog is calm and the baby is quiet. Ideally, at least two people should help with the introduction: one to control and reward the dog and the other to hold the baby. If you have conditioned the dog properly, food rewards should no longer be necessary.

Depending upon the personality of the dog, the person holding the baby may be sitting or standing. The dog should be on a leash in a sit/stay position and is rewarded with petting or praise. In most cases it is best to bring the baby to a dog in a sit/stay position as opposed to allowing the dog to run over to the baby.

Gradually, bring the dog and baby closer together. The dog should be allowed to see the baby but must remain in a controlled sitting position. As long as the dog is quiet, it should be allowed to remain nearby until it is necessary to move the baby or the baby becomes restless and noisy. Such introductions should be repeated several times during the first day.

The dog may eventually be brought close enough so it can smell the baby, but not close enough to be able to bite or scratch. This is generally a distance of two to three feet for most dogs. Do not be tempted to allow even the friendliest dog to lick or come in direct contact with a baby during these first few interactions. Injuries can occur at an incredibly rapid speed so it is better to use caution and proceed slowly during the first few days. You must use your own discretion as to when it is appropriate to let your dog sniff the baby more closely. If after several introductions the dog is not unduly excited and can be verbally controlled, the procedures can be repeated without a leash under strict supervision.

## When can I allow my dog the freedom of the house?

The first step is to allow the dog to wander freely while you are holding the baby.

**"The dog should not ever have access to the baby  
in unsupervised situations."**

The dog should not, however, ever have access to the baby in any unsupervised situation. A baby gate should be put on the entrance to the baby's room or the dog should be confined to areas of the house where it does not have access to the baby in the absence of the owners. The dog should be allowed as much freedom in the house and interaction with the adults as possible. Initially, when the parents prepare to play with the baby in the dog's presence, they should also interact with the dog in some manner. They might say, "Let's go see the baby," or ask the dog to sit and pet it or give it a reward. Again, food rewards are not necessary every time the owner asks the dog to sit or stay but occasional food rewards will help keep its interest and obedience levels high.

No one knows when a dog understands that an infant is a person. Most dogs adjust to the infant within a few days, while others may take several weeks. After the dog becomes used to the child's sounds and movements (it begins to pay little attention to these activities and is not excited or nervous when they occur), the parents can begin to relax their vigilance in the presence of the baby. This depends on the dog's history of aggression, especially predatory or hunting behavior. It is less likely that an unfortunate incident will occur if the dog is non-aggressive, relaxed and relatively uninterested in the baby under supervised circumstances. If you are concerned, you may keep baby gates on the baby's bedroom door or put up additional gates throughout the house to prevent access to the child.

**"Exercise caution and always err on the side of safety."**

The general rule is never to leave a child, especially one under three years of age, alone with any dog at any time. Obviously, only the family can make the decision if and when to leave an older child and dog alone and under what circumstances. Exercise caution and always err on the side of safety.

Most incidents of dogs injuring babies occur within the first few hours or days of the infant's presence in the home or when a dog unexpectedly comes upon a new baby or child in an unsupervised situation. It is believed that predatory or hunting behavior is the motivation for the majority of attacks on infants. Other times a dog will bite a child due to the child taking or playing with favored objects, interference with food or feeding, or if the child startles or inadvertently hurts the dog during play.

To get used to the infant, the dog must be gradually exposed to the infant over time. There is simply no safe way to rush this process. Initial contacts must be supervised and made enjoyable or rewarding for the dog so it does not associate negative events or punishment with the baby. With close supervision and patience, most pets bond with the infant in a special way that benefits them both. There is nothing more rewarding than watching your two- and four-legged family members playing and growing together!

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM*

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