

# Preparing your Dog for the Arrival of your Child

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Congratulations! You're pregnant and your "pack" will soon be growing. If you're like most people, you're caught between anticipation and trepidation. You're thrilled about the arrival of your new child and you're concerned about doing everything right. If you own a dog, certainly some of your concern revolves around him. You're probably asking yourself: "How will my dog handle this? Will he be jealous? Will he be careful?" And most importantly: "Is there any chance that he might bite my child?" If you're not concerned, you should be. Approximately 80% of dog bites happen to children under five.

I have recently written a book entitled, *There's a Baby in the House: Preparing your Dog for the Arrival of your Child*, which helps you find your way through these concerns, answer important questions, and set the stage for a warm and mutually beneficial relationship between your dog and your new child.

The flow of the book follows the steps an owner should take in order to assess their dog, build a solid relationship, eliminate any potential behavior problems long before the child arrives and ensure a smooth transition after it does. Too many women, failing to consider the dramatic implications that the arrival of a child has for a dog, overlook this important issue and end up re-homing their dog within three months of their child's arrival. A tragedy, and in most cases entirely avoidable.

If you're an expecting dog owner *the very first thing* that you should do is to identify the changes that need to be made in the life of your dog once the baby arrives and implement them NOW! You do not want your dog to associate any changes that need to be made in your relationship with the arrival of your child thus setting up a competitive or jealous dynamic. Not only that but once your baby arrives you'll have precious little time or energy for dealing with any errant behavior on the part of your dog. All your attention will be on your baby where it should be. Failing to implement relevant changes in the life of your dog prior to baby's arrival is the single most common mistake expecting dog owners make. And keep in mind, things that you do not consider

problematic now might become problematic with a child in your midst. So take a careful look: is your dog sleeping in bed with you, pushy and demanding, barky, prone to steal things and get into mischief when you're not looking? If so, better deal with it now. Does he get tense when you try to take things away from him, touch him in certain ways, or get near his food? Does he pull on the leash, crash out the door or jump up on you to say hello? Again, you might tolerate such behaviors now but they will seriously compromise the quality of your life with a baby in tow. Such issues are relatively easy to deal with and in the book I have outlined simple steps to enable you to resolve them.

More serious problems include over-protectiveness, separation anxiety (yes, your dog will need to learn to spend time alone and not as the center of your undivided attention once your baby arrives – no small feat for many dogs), and sensitivity to sudden and unpredictable movements.

These problems and many others that are addressed in the book are readily resolvable but the lynchpin of the successful resolution of any behavior problem is building the right relationship with your dog, a relationship in which your dog is in the deeply ingrained habit of *taking direction from you*. In other words, you're the boss, not the dog. Funny as it might sound, it's often the other way around and that's why the first third of my book, entitled "The Doggie Twelve-Step Program," is dedicated entirely to relationship building. From that foundation almost anything is possible. Simple things like always giving your dog a command before you have an interaction with him, not letting him run out the door ahead of you, and being a little aloof with him can do a world of good in causing your dog to *cheerfully* accept your leadership role.

In a minority of cases the question arises as to whether or not the dog you have right now would be appropriate to keep given the arrival of a child. In the chapter dedicated to this subject I offer four factors to consider if your dog has bitten or threatened to bite you under various circumstances. The first factor is *threshold of reactivity*. In other words, how much of a certain stimulus is required in order to make the dog reactive. The second is *level of intensity*. How ferocious is your dog in his response? Third is *previous history*. How long has your dog been doing this? The longer, the worse. And finally there are *crossover considerations*. For example, let's say your dog is mildly annoyed by your approach to his food dish while he is eating but he has injured other

dogs in altercations at the park. I would view this as a red flag because of my concern that if your child wandered around his food dish he might be more likely to respond to him the way he responded to the dog at the park (for dogs tend to view children as lower ranking pack members unless consistently taught otherwise) for he does not have the same respect for him as he does for you. While the book does offer numerous solutions to aggressive behaviors I suggest that if you are experiencing such issues that you hire a qualified behavior professional (not merely an obedience trainer) to help you resolve such issues and assess your dog. Keep in mind that some behaviors are not one hundred percent reversible and that the option of keeping your child and your dog separate at all times is *a very bad idea*, first because you can't assure no contact forever between them and that attempting to do so would cause the dog to view the child more as a stranger in his territory than a member of his pack. In some cases the best choice is to re-home the dog both for his sake and the sake of your child.

Supposing that your dog is not one of this rare minority, there are many things that you can do to help create not only safety but very positive associations for your dog with the presence of your child. First, by creating zones in your house that your dog is by and large forbidden in without your specific permission and accompaniment you build effective buffer zones into your dog's relationship with your child. Once these zones are established you can also use them to teach your dog how wonderful it is for him when you are interacting with your baby. Sound confusing? Here's an example. Start by making the future baby's room off limits to your dog. Once that's handled allow him to enter the room only with your permission and accompaniment. Once in the room always ask him for certain obedience exercises, especially down-stays. Soon he'll get the idea that when he enters this room he's to do a down-stay in the corner (you could even put a bed for him there). In addition, teach your dog to tolerate alone time every day to the tune of at least a few hours. Now, once your baby arrives allow your dog to come into the baby's room when you go in to change diapers or play or whatever and assume his down-stay. If he has been left alone for a few hours prior to that he will welcome the contact with and your child even if it is low-level such as in this case. In other words, the presence of your child means a positive social engagement for him. This is quite different than what usually happens which is that when mommy goes to play with or care for baby,

doggie gets thrown out thus potentially setting up a competitive or jealous dynamic. This is only one of many examples of specific exercises that can teach your dog to accept your child as a beloved pack member and ultimately companion, the nuts and bolts of which are outlined in the book.

Other things that you can do to ensure a seamless transition to siblinghood for your dog include

- Teaching him the difference between doggie toys and child's toys (start by getting doggie toys that are distinctly different from baby toys since often these two bear striking similarities).
- Get a baby doll and wrap it in a scented baby blanket (ask a friend to use a new blanket on her baby for a few days and then wrap it around your doll) and teach your dog appropriate manners around your "faux baby," thus setting up a "template of behavior" for future interactions.
- Hire a dog walker to take over exercise responsibilities during the period immediately after birth. This will take a lot of pressure off of you and produce a tired dog. The old adage that tired dogs are good dogs is definitely true.

While the above does not comprise a comprehensive list by any means, it should serve to provide a sense of direction and purpose. One thing to keep in mind in all of this is that there should never be any unsupervised interactions between your dog and your child ever, for any reason, period! Can I be more clear than that? Remember, there's too much at stake and it only takes two seconds for something to go terribly wrong.

All that having been said keep in mind that your true challenge and the true test of the success of your efforts at integration will be seen once your child passes the eight-month threshold. What happens then? Your little one starts crawling and rapidly becoming highly mobile. This means that the frequency of unexpected and random

encounters between your child and your dog will increase dramatically. That's where you'll find out if all your hard work paid off and indeed, if you've worked hard it will.

In closing, please understand that what I've outlined above represents the tip of the iceberg of strategies designed to make the integration of your dog and your child as seamless, warm and rewarding as possible. While learning and implementing such strategies implies varying amounts of work it promises a wholesome and fulfilling relationship between your child and your dog. The payoff of this relationship will last for years and thus makes any work you have to put in on the front end more than worth it.

All that having been said, I wish you the best of luck with the exciting events that are unfolding in your life. Few things provide a living connection to the mystery of life like the opportunity to be the vehicle for a new life entering this world. The fact that we participate in this mystery is in itself extraordinary and should be the source of the deepest joy. Providing a wonderful home for a dog, that most loyal and devoted of animal companions, in this context should only enrich this experience. With this in mind I leave you with best wishes and heartfelt blessings.