❖Advice for pet owners

Bringing home baby: Introducing a pet to your new arrival

You want the relationship between your children and your pets to start off on the right foot and develop in a healthy direction. Here are some tips to help make sure the whole household gets along.

Before a baby arrives, expectant parents should prepare their pets for the new family member and furnishings. You may want to schedule a special appointment with your veterinarian to discuss your specific concerns. Here are some general tips to keep in mind.

PRELIMINARY INTRODUCTIONS AND CHANGES

In addition to your baby, your pet will need to become familiar and comfortable with many other changes. Before the baby arrives, expose your pet to baby paraphernalia such as strollers, swings, and noisy toys. Some dogs are anxious about things that roll or may try to bite at wheels, so if you plan to take family walks, start walking your dog with the stroller before your baby is born. If your dog seems afraid of the stroller or chases the wheels, start by walking your dog very slowly on-leash next to the stroller. Reward your dog with a favorite treat if it is able to walk next to the stroller without reacting. If your dog continues to be afraid of the stroller or to bite at the wheels, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to discuss the problem in detail.

If your pet is extremely sensitive to unfamiliar or loud sounds, you can work on desensitizing it to baby sounds by playing recordings of baby sounds. But not all animals respond to recorded sounds, so test your pet's reaction first by playing the sounds at a real-life volume. If your pet shows any signs of arousal, fear, anxiety, or aggression, then begin desensitization: Start by playing the sounds at a volume low enough that your pet doesn't react. While the sounds are playing, use positive reinforcement techniques, such as giving treats, feeding meals, playing with toys, or petting or brushing your pet. Over several sessions, very gradually increase the volume until your pet has no reaction to the sounds at normal volume.

Finally, don't allow a pet to share a bed with an infant. Your pet should get used to sleeping away from the bed before the baby arrives. Pets can be taught to sleep elsewhere by blocking their access to the bedroom with a baby gate (dogs) or by closing the bedroom door (cats). Another method is to confine them in a new sleeping location, such as a different bedroom or a comfortable kennel, crate, or pen.

SIT, ROVER, SIT

One of the most important things to teach all dogs is not to jump up onto people—both people who are standing and people who are sitting on furniture. It is even more important when an infant will soon be in people's arms or on their laps. This behavior can be fairly easily prevented by teaching and reinforcing (with rewards) an alternative behavior such as "sit."

Teach your dog to perform a calm, controlled behavior such as "sit" or "down" before it receives anything (*e.g.* petting, play, doors opened, invited onto furniture, food, treats) from you and any other adults who interact with the dog. Think of this affection control program as good practice for teaching your child to say "Please"—sitting is a dog's way of saying "Please."

CAT-SPECIFIC CHANGES

In preparing for a new baby as well as looking ahead to the time your child is mobile, you may be considering moving your cat's food and water dishes and litter boxes to out-of-the-way locations such as basements, closets, or laundry rooms. Some owners also switch from open litter boxes to covered ones in an attempt to limit children's access to the boxes. As an alternative, consider putting open litter boxes in child-free rooms (*e.g.* home offices) and installing a pet door or propping the door to the room open wide enough to allow only the cat to get inside. It is best to make any lit-

This client information sheet may be photocopied for distribution by veterinarians to their clients. Written permission is required for any other use.

ter box or feeding changes well before the baby is born because if problems develop (housesoiling, weight loss), you will be able to more easily identify the cause and make appropriate adjustments.

To keep cats out of the crib or nursery (to prevent the cat from sleeping with or on the baby and to reduce cat hair in the room), put up a crib tent (netting tents that stretch over cribs, keeping the baby in and all else out) or install a screen door in the nursery so you can hear the baby, but curious cats can't enter.

If you have concerns about your cat jumping into your lap while you are holding the baby, before the baby is born, teach your cat to wait for an invitation to hop up by standing up and dumping the cat out of your lap every time the cat jumps up on its own. Then teach your cat a jump-up command, possibly using a treat as a lure, so it learns that an invitation is needed to sit in a person's lap.

Make sure you also prepare comfortable areas, such as cat trees, window seats, or even folded towels on top of cabinets or on bookshelves, where your cat can get away from an eager toddler.

HOMECOMING

When a new mother first comes home from the hospital and greets her pet, she should be empty-handed. Find a time when you are not busy with the baby and can devote all your attention to the pet, especially a dog, before introducing it to the baby.

When a pet is first introduced to a baby, make sure at least two adults are present—one to supervise the baby and the other to supervise the pet. Dogs should be wearing leashes, but it may be acceptable to have them drag the leashes. Don't force an introduction, just let the pet be around the baby.

Allow your pet to politely sniff at the baby, but if a pet seems interested in lots of sniffing or licking, draw its attention away with another activity such as playing with toys. If a dog seems overly fearful or anxious (flattened ears, tucked tail, yawning, or lip licking) or rambunctious or shows any aggression, the adult supervising the dog should calmly, without scolding or yelling, pick up the leash and walk the dog away from the baby.

Less commonly, dogs will be aroused and focused on the baby. This can be a serious situation. These dogs must be kept strictly separated from the infant. They may be able to be reintroduced to the child once they are able to see the child as a person rather than as a helpless prey-object. Until then, access to the child is not allowed. If you are seeing this sort of behavior from your dog, or less commonly from your cat, contact your veterinarian immediately.

SETTING UP BARRIERS

In general, pets, especially dogs, should learn to be separated from their owners. No dog should ever be left alone with a small child. Essentially, this means that either a parent must always be holding the baby, or barriers must be set up so parents can safely allow infants to spend time in an apparatus such as a bouncy seat or a swing. Your dog should get used to having you around but not having access to you. Reward your dog for being good and quiet on the other side of a barrier (*e.g.* behind a baby gate or in a crate). These rewards can be active (tossing treats to the dog or walking over and petting the dog) or passive (giving a food-dispensing toy to the dog when the separation begins).

Also keep your baby separated from your pet during car rides. Pets should be secured in a carrier or by a barrier or safety harness and seat belt, which also helps protect them in case of an accident.

Once your pet adjusts to your new focus on the baby, it usually ignores this other creature in the house. Most of the problems seen between pets and babies involve crawling children (*e.g.* 6 months and older) and toddlers, not immobile infants. So it's a good idea to look ahead to things that may change (*e.g.* the addition of baby gates) as the baby begins to crawl and walk, since this time comes faster than you might anticipate. You should also provide resting areas that allow your pets to get away from curious children.

Dogs and cats should be fed in locations where it is easy for you to monitor what is in their bowls if children are nearby. This may mean feeding behind barriers and switching from free-choice to meal feeding. Certainly if there has been any history of a pet aggressively guarding food from other animals or people, it should be fed behind a barrier, and long-lasting treats (*e.g.* rawhides, stuffed hollow toys, marrow bones) should be available only when a pet is physically separated from a child.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

It can sometimes be difficult to achieve the proper balance between what is needed to keep everyone safe and what is needed to keep everyone happy if pets have multiple behavior problems, such as fear or aggression issues and separation anxiety. And in some cases there is no reasonable way to manage the level of supervision or separation that would be required to keep children safe. This may be because of a pet's inability to cope with separation, a child's inability to follow instructions involving the pet, or an adult's inability to maintain a safe environment. If serious behavior problems arise between your pets and your children, contact your veterinarian. Your veterinarian can help identify the problem's source and work with you to find an appropriate solution.

THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

If you take the right steps, the relationship between your pets and your children can blossom into a lifelong bond. Regular visits to your veterinarian will help you keep your pets and your relationship with them healthy and strong. ❖

Information provided by Laurie Bergman, VMD, DACVB, University of California Veterinary Medical Center, San Diego Behavior Service, 10435 Sorrento Valley Road, Suite 101, San Diego, CA 92121.

Photos © istockphoto.com/L Galloway/Craig Veltri