

Helping Pets Cope with a New Baby in the Home

There's a lot to do to get your home ready for a new baby. It's an exciting time and sometimes we overlook the needs of our home's other residents – particularly the four-legged ones! If a baby is expected, there is no reason to get rid of your dog or cat! A little preparation will go a long way in making a smooth and safe transition for everyone.

Pets easily get stressed out when routines change. It's never a good idea to disappear for a couple of days and suddenly arrive back with a new baby, and expect your dog or cat to be as thrilled as you are at the new arrival. Animals thrive on attention and may not understand why you've suddenly refocused it away from them. It may cause them to act out and misbehave. Because dogs are pack animals and value the family structure, they may experience something similar to sibling rivalry.

What can you do to ease your pet into this important transition? It's easy, and any soon-to-be parent can accomplish it with a little patience and time.

1. Take your pet to the vet. Make sure all their shots are up to date and they're healthy. Get them used to having their toenails clipped too!
2. Spayed or neutered pets are calmer and healthier. If your pet has not been sterilized, now is a great time to do it!
3. If a pet likes to bite, pounce, wrestle or swat at you, redirect that behavior. Offer them a toy to chew on instead of your hand.
4. Train your dog to sit calmly on the floor next to you before letting them up on the furniture or in your lap. Remember, that lap will soon hold a child and you don't want your dog leaping on them!
5. If you have friends with infants, ask them over. Let your pet get used to little kids & noises they make. Make sure you monitor all interactions though!
6. Get your pet used to the sounds that babies make. You may want to play a recording of a baby crying. Make sure they get familiar with other sounds too. If you plan on using a mechanical baby swing or crib mobile, turn them on for a little while each day. If you're going to use a rocking chair to comfort your baby, start using it before they come home. If your animal freaks out at the sounds of these, gently discipline, comfort them and reward them for good behavior.
7. Don't ever let your pet jump onto or into a crib, changing table or other areas your new baby may lay. Double sided tape applied to surfaces works well in discouraging cats from jumping on tables.
8. If you don't want your pet in the baby's room, put up a baby gate. Most times, if your dog can see you it will be a little calmer.
9. Get your pet used to the smells associated with babies. If you're going to use baby wipes, powder or oil, let your dog or cat check it out and get used to the odor. That way they won't be sticking their nose in while you're tending to your new arrival!
10. Once you've had your baby and are still in the hospital, someone may want to bring a blanket or cap home that the baby has touched. This helps your pet get familiar with your baby's scent and may make them more comfortable once the baby actually comes home.

Remember, having a new baby is a hectic and exciting time for everyone. Try to stick to regular routines when it comes to your pets and they'll be less stressed out, because a freaked-out pet may lead to bad behavior. Try to spend a little one-on-one time each day, it makes them happy, and relaxes you. Mistakes are always going to happen and jealousies may arise. Try to roll with it, reward good behavior and gently discipline when appropriate. You want your pets to associate the baby as a positive thing. A little patience and preparation can make this a smooth transition for everyone!

This article has been adapted from The Humane Society of the United States publication *Preparing Pets for a New Baby*.

For more information, talk to your veterinarian, or visit www.petsforlife.org.

REACH CNY (formerly the Family Ties Network, Inc.,) works to ensure access and support for the full range of quality, culturally-sensitive health and human services; to reduce teen pregnancies; and promote the health and well-being of individuals and families; through education and advocacy.

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