

Bringing Home Baby

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Please understand this article was written under the assumption that you do not own an aggressive dog. If your dog has ever shown aggression, or ever shows aggression in the future, contact a professional dog trainer immediately. Growling, showing teeth, snapping, etc, should never be taken lightly and seriously endangers the welfare of your newborn baby. You will need professional guidance.

So, you're having a baby and you already have a dog. What's the best way to introduce the two so that there are as few problems as possible? I'm sure you've heard that you should bring home a dirty diaper, or a blanket from the hospital after the baby is born, so that your dog will become accustomed to the scent of the baby. This is a good idea, but did you know there are multiple things you can do before you have your baby, and not wait until after you give birth, to help smooth the transition of bringing home baby to your family dog?

First, consider your dog's current behavior. Not the behavior that you would like him to have, or hope for him to have, but his behavior on this very day. Does your dog jump on people? If so, what if he jumped on you while you are holding your baby? Does he jump on the furniture without waiting to be invited? If so, what if your baby was lying on the bed and the dog jumped up, landing on the baby? Does he come when called? If not, how will you keep your dog from running out the front door when visitors arrive and you have your baby in your arms? Does he drag you down the sidewalk on his leash as if he were heading up the Alaskan Sled Dog Team? If so, how will you safely walk your dog while pushing your baby in a stroller? Would you allow a friend's dog with these behaviors to be around your newborn baby? Hopefully, not, so you should not allow your own dog to exhibit these behaviors around your baby.

The first step to ensuring a smooth transition is to form a relationship with your dog where he knows and understands that you are the leader, and he must follow through with your directions. This can be done by enrolling in an obedience class with your dog. There are two major points to consider when looking for an obedience program. Keep in mind that, one; you have limited time to get your dog under control, probably much less than 9 months! And two, you will eventually have limited mobility due to your enlarging belly, aching back, loose joints, and swollen hands and feet. Sounds like fun, huh? So, when you're looking for an obedience program, be sure it will accommodate both your physical needs and your timeframe for needed results.

Obviously, a full obedience course is recommended if possible. However, if you are well into your pregnancy, and really short on time, try to find a trainer that will offer you a shortened, but effective, program that will fit your needs. How do you know what your needs are, you ask? Well, having recently had a baby myself, I am comfortable recommending a **program containing a minimum of 4 basic obedience commands**, along with a mannerly walk (no leash pulling).

Recommended Commands

Come: your dog should come when called, at minimum, around your home with distractions such as visitors. It would be even better if your dog was reliable outside, off-leash.

Off: your dog should be taught to stay off of people and furniture unless he is invited up. This will help prevent any accidents while someone is carrying the baby or while sitting with the baby on the sofa.

Leave It: your dog should be taught to leave certain objects alone when told to. This can include dirty diapers, food that the baby has dropped on the floor, or is still holding in her hand, baby toys and a host of other objects.

Place: this command teaches your dog to stay in a specified area such as on a mat/board or on his bed. This is very useful when visitors have arrived, when you may be changing the baby on the floor, when you are showering and need to keep your dog in the bathroom with you, or for when you just need a moment's peace without having the dog, or baby, in your space!

Finally, you want to be sure your dog walks politely on a leash. This means no more dragging you down the sidewalk, or tangling up your legs with the leash. You will want your dog to be able to walk nicely with you while you are also pushing your baby in her stroller.

Before Baby Comes Home

Along with obedience, you want to begin helping your dog adjust to the lack of time you will have for him when the baby arrives. **Begin by paying less attention to your dog now.** Trust me. You will not have as much time for your dog as you did before having the baby. You will begin to have more time for your dog as you and your baby settle into a schedule, but this won't happen for at least a few months. By doing this now, he is less likely to associate the lack of attention with the new baby. It will be something that he has already become accustomed to over the past few months.

Not sure how to ignore your dog? For starters, don't pet the dog every time he solicits it. Remember, some day soon your hands will be filled with diapers, bags, bottles and the baby! It will be impossible to pet your dog whenever he wants you to. Also, if you're the type of person who takes your dog everywhere, even if he just sits in the car while you run in for milk, you'll need to start cutting back on the car trips with him. This does not mean you can never take your dog anywhere. Of course I still want you walking him daily, and even taking him on trips to the park or the feed store. Just don't take him with you every single time you leave your home.

Let's think about what sort of toys your baby is going to receive as gifts. For starters, there are stuffed bears, stuffed dolls, stuffed bugs that vibrate, stuffed ducks that quack, stuffed shapes that squeak, stuffed Winnie the Pooh, and stuffed caterpillars. Now, please read that paragraph again. Do you see a pattern? YES! Everything is stuffed!! Now, my guess is that your dog has at least one stuffed toy lying around the house, and it probably squeaks. Your dog should have toys that are distinctly his. This means they should not be stuffed and they should not squeak. **Things such as hard rubber toys (Kongs, balls), knotted ropes, and cloth Frisbees are all good to start with.** Over time, it is possible to teach your dog what toys are his and which toys are your baby's. However, during the teaching phase, it is easier on you, and the dog, if you make an effort to differentiate between toys.

Not only should your dog have his own toys, he should have his own space where he can safely go and not be disturbed by the baby, who will eventually be mobile. A crate is a great way to give your dog a 'safe zone'. Set up the crate in a place that is easily accessible to your dog. Fill it with soft bedding, and if it's a wire crate, cover it with a blanket. The door can always be left open so your dog can come and go as he pleases. Your dog should not be disturbed while in his crate. By this, I mean no poking and prodding by the baby! Of course you can call your dog out of the crate as you need to, but he should not be bothered by nosey children while he's trying to have some private time. **As the baby grows, be sure to enforce the rules to her...don't bother the dog when he has retreated to his crate.**

Once your dog's 'sanctuary' is set up, you will need to start setting up your baby's sanctuary...the nursery! This presents another great opportunity to involve your dog in getting ready for the baby. While putting together the crib, furniture, stroller and playpen, amongst other things, allow your dog to investigate. Don't ban your dog from the area that you are working in. I feel that if you restrict a dog access to investigate, you may increase his interest level and he can actually become bothersome. This will only increase tension between you and your dog. Allow him to come into the room and sniff through everything. If he shows interest by remaining in the room while you finish your assembly, allow him to calmly remain with you.

On the other hand, if the nursery is a place where you intend on restricting your dog's access, then begin that restriction now. Use a physical boundary such as a baby-gate or keeping the door closed, or, even better, teach your dog to remain behind the threshold of the door until invited in. Whatever you choose to do, either allowing your dog access or not, don't wait until your baby has arrived to begin teaching your dog what is acceptable. Start today.

Once your items are assembled, use them before the baby arrives. Put the swing on and leave it in motion for a while. Push the stroller around the house and outside in the driveway. Do NOT chase your dog with it, especially if your dog is hesitant around any of the equipment. Practice loading the stroller, unfolding the stroller and pushing the stroller, all while you have the dog on lead with you. **It's much safer to get your coordination issues under**

control before you have your little one sitting in the stroller!

The last two things you want to do before having the baby is bring the dog to the vet for a checkup and arrange some help with your dog for when you are in the hospital and for when you first come home. Knowing someone is 'on call' to help take care of him when you leave for the hospital will allow you to concentrate on the exciting time to come! A vet exam can uncover any unnoticed aches, pains, or infections that may cause your dog to be a bit under the weather, which may lead to irritability.

Bringing home baby

So, you've had your baby and you're ready to come home! Congratulations! Up until the day you left for the hospital, you've been preparing your dog for the arrival of your baby. Good work. **The key to introducing the baby is to stay calm and don't make a fuss.**

When you arrive home, leave dad in the car with baby while you go into the house and greet your dog. Remember, you've been away for at least a few days, so he will be excited to see you. If, for any reason, you feel you won't be able to handle him by yourself (for example you're recovering from a c-section), then simply switch roles and allow Dad to enter the home first.

Once you are inside, spend a moment with your dog. This will allow him to greet you and it will also give him a moment to check out baby's scent, which is all over you. Once you have said your hellos, attach his leash and practice a little obedience with him.

While you are doing all of this, Dad should be outside taking the baby out of the car seat and getting ready for the introduction.

If weather permits, bring your dog outside for the meeting. If not, the introductions can be made in the house.

With your dog still **on-leash**; walk out to the baby, who, at this point, should be snuggled in dad's arms. Allow your dog to greet dad and baby by sniffing and getting a pat on the shoulder from dad. Do NOT allow him to jump up. Remind him to stay 'off' and use the leash to tug him if he decides to try and jump. Remember, baby's safety always comes first. Most likely, he will give a few sniffs and then move on...great!! **Do not force the baby into his space.** If he shows little or no interest, this is perfectly acceptable. Once the introduction has taken place, you can begin settling in with baby!

Safety First!

Now that you are all home, you will need to begin the 'balancing act' of keeping your newborn safe while still including your dog in family activities. When I refer to keeping your baby 'safe', I am not only referring to a possible bite, I am referring to an accidental scratch, being stepped on, or being knocked over. Don't think the only damage that can be done by your dog is a bite to your newborn. Accidents happen every day.

Okay. So, first things first. **NEVER LEAVE YOUR DOG AND BABY ALONE....NEVER....NOT EVEN FOR A MINUTE.** No matter how well behaved your dog is, or how much he loves children, he is still a dog. He is not a 'little person in fur', which means that he has instincts and drives that can be turned on in the snap of a finger. Unfortunately, we don't always know what can kick on those instinctual behaviors. For this reason, your baby and dog must always be supervised while together. When people ask if a particular dog 'bites', I like to say, "He's got teeth, doesn't he?" If your dog has teeth, he's capable of biting. This doesn't mean he will bite, but always remember that he can bite. One single bite to a baby can cause unimaginable consequences for the dog and your baby. It doesn't matter what breed, size, color, or temperament of your dog. Be smart, never say, "My dog would never..." A dog is a dog is a dog.

So, since dog and baby cannot be left alone together, what does that mean to you? It means you won't be getting much 'alone time' unless your dog is confined. What I mean by this is, when you take a shower, dog or baby should sit in the bathroom. When you go to use the bathroom, dog goes with you (usually easier than bringing baby). When you go upstairs to get dressed, dog or baby tags along. When you go downstairs to do laundry, dog or baby goes

with you. Get my point? Never leave them alone together.

If you cannot keep your dog with you or you just need a bit of 'alone time', which you will, confine your dog. This is the perfect opportunity to use your dog's crate throughout the day. Or, you can use a baby gate to limit his access to certain rooms. **Don't feel guilty about confining your dog at certain times during the day.** Soon enough you'll be doing the same thing with your little one by putting her in a playpen! Consider your dog's crate his playpen...a safe place to put him while you both relax.

Not only will you need to keep your dog (or baby) with you at all times, you will need to be aware of your dog when you lay your baby down on the floor. I advise you not to put your newborn on the floor if your dog is freely wandering around the home. Along with the obvious possibility of a bite, some dogs have no concept of where their feet are, and may inadvertently step on the baby causing harm to your little one. Even dogs that are normally calm may frantically run for the door if a visitor arrives. And according to Murphy's Law, your dog will take the path to the door where your baby happens to be lying at that moment.

And finally, never leave your dog and baby unsupervised. Not even for a minute. I know I already said it, but I feel it's the single most important piece of advice I can give you. And so, I will say it one more time. **Never leave your dog and baby unsupervised.**

Okay! Now we can move on!

The Transition

Since I've mentioned how little time you're going to have after you give birth, you must be wondering how you're going to be able to smoothly transition your dog into your expanded family.

Well, there are actually a few simple actions that when done on a daily basis, will help him feel like part of the family. Since you have completed an obedience program, you can begin integrating the commands the very day you come home. Begin by putting a Place-board in each room. This way, no matter what room you're in, or what you're doing in that room, you will be able to keep your dog with you, and under control. This will help him to feel like part of the family.

Help make your dog feel included with the new baby. When you go to pick up your baby from a nap, or because she's crying, say "Let's go, Fido" and allow your dog to follow you to the cradle or crib. When you pick baby up, pat your dog on the head and tell him he's a good boy. In the long run, this small gesture may even teach your dog to alert you to your baby's cry!

When you are sitting on the couch, or rocking your baby, allow him to investigate. Don't ban your dog from being around your newborn, but be sure to keep the situation under your control at all times. If he comes over to you calmly, allow him to sniff your little one. Always keep a hand within inches of your dog's head so you will be able to control him if need be. You can do this by petting him while he calmly investigates. This allows you to praise him for good behavior, it helps form a positive association with the baby, and it will allow you to respond instantly should you need to shield your baby from your dog's excitement.

If you are not comfortable with your dog being in close proximity of your new baby, then do not allow it. You know your dog best. Only you can decide if it is appropriate for your dog to approach.

Now that you have graduated obedience class, your dog should be able to walk nicely on a leash. This means no pulling you down the street. Walks are a wonderful way to have time together. They are great exercise, and after having a new baby, they are great for your sanity! Whenever possible, take your dog on walks with you or even on short trips to the park. Just remember, when traveling in a vehicle with your dog and baby, make certain that your dog (and baby) are properly restrained. For the dog, this can include using a crate, a barrier (mesh or metal bars), or a doggie seatbelt. Always keep your baby's safety in mind. One wrong move from your dog while you're driving can be disastrous for all of you. **Stay safe...always restrain all living beings in your vehicle.**

How to Use Obedience Effectively

Here are a few suggestions on how to integrate your obedience commands. They will help smooth the transition for everyone involved when used properly.

Place (also, Sit/Down if your dog knows them): these can all be used when guests come to visit your new family. Be sure they don't forget to greet the dog. Keeping him under control will help lessen your frustration and your worry about him accidentally hurting someone in all of the excitement. Also, use these commands to keep your dog within the family action, yet keeping him safely at bay.

Leave It: this command can be used if your dog is approaching your baby, dirty diapers (yeah, I know, gross, but true), or a bottle that's sitting on the table. You can also use this command in the future to help teach your dog not to steal food from your baby's hands.

Off: use this command to keep your dog from jumping on guest, from jumping on furniture when he has not been asked up, from jumping on you while you're holding your baby.

Come: this command can be used when calling your dog from room to room, when guests arrive and he rushes the door, or when your arms are filled with baby and gear and you just need him with you for whatever reason.

And finally, walking nicely. This is self explanatory. It will more relaxing, and safer, to have a dog that walks nicely, without pulling, on a leash.

So, as you can see, there are many ways to help smooth the transition of dog and baby into your family life, together. It starts long before you give birth and will continue throughout the life of your dog. **Congratulations on your new family and good luck!**

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