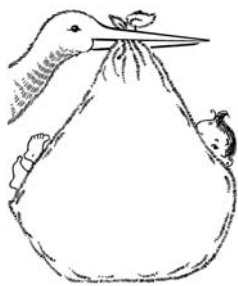


"BOWSER MEETS BABY"... OR HOW TO INTRODUCE YOUR NEW BABY TO THE FAMILY DOG



Congratulations, you're going to have a baby! In all the flurry of activity, many parents-to-be forget to prepare the family dog. This can be a costly mistake. Dogs are social creatures. Left on their own, they form packs. The pack is organized. There are leaders and followers, all equally essential to the pack's survival. Your dog belongs to a pack, too: your family. The people lead, the dog follows. It's that simple. It is important to recognize and respect your dog for who and what he is — a dog. You must be able to communicate with him and read his body language. He needs structure and guidance if he is to function appropriately within the family. How? Read on.

BEFORE BABY ARRIVES

How good are your dog's obedience skills?

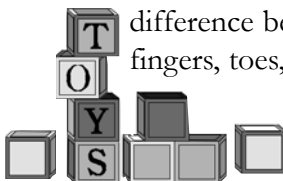
If your dog does not know the commands SIT, OFF, DOWN, and STAY; teach them. Use lots of praise and positive reinforcement. Make sitting and staying a wonderful thing! Begin to add distractions such as dolls dressed in the baby's layette, wheel around the baby carriage, get tapes of crying babies, be creative. Use treats, favorite toys and lots of praise and love. Let the dog know when he is right! If your dog jumps up on people, it is very important to train him to keep all four feet on the floor. The dog can do serious harm by jumping on you while you're cradling junior in your arms. At this point, it doesn't matter that the dog is happy to see you. Teach him to sit rather than jump. Remember you want the dog to be successful and to have fun.

Is your dog spayed or neutered?

Neutered and spayed dogs make better family companions. Unaltered dogs more likely to growl, snap, and bite than their neutered counterparts. Unneutered males tend to be bossy, pushy and challenging. They are easily distracted, making training difficult at best. Unspayed females go through hormonal changes before, during and after each heat cycle, causing their behavior to become erratic and sometimes aggressive. Intact dogs experience sexual frustration and engage in household marking, daring escapes and overbarking — not to mention mounting both children and adults.

Does your dog guard food, bones, balls or toys?

If your dog guards objects, he must learn that this is unacceptable behavior. You may be able to tell the difference between dog toys and baby toys but your infant cannot. Don't risk your baby's fingers, toes, or life; train the dog. As his primary caretaker, you must be able to take any item out of your dog's mouth. If he bares his teeth, growls or threatens you, call a behavior consultant. While many dogs can be retrained, you should not attempt this without professional assistance.



Does your dog have a strong predatory drive?

This is one of the most important questions to answer. Dogs with strong predatory drives may view infants as prey resulting in attacks in which infants are mauled or killed. Be honest. A newborn infant bears little resemblance to the humans most dogs know and love. They sound, smell, and move in unfamiliar ways. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security. Some dogs don't express their drive on the child until the baby starts crawling or toddling. The high pitched squeals and jerky movements of babies and toddlers can trigger predatory behavior, even though you may not have witnessed it before. Does your dog chase cars, bicyclists, joggers or small game like squirrels and cats? Has your dog ever caught and/or killed small game? If he has, you need to consult a behaviorist, preferably before the baby is born. In extreme cases, the dog may need to be re-homed or euthanized.

Has your dog bitten anyone?

Please don't rationalize this. Has your dog's teeth connected with human flesh? That is a bite. Has your dog snapped at anyone? A snap is a warning or a bite that didn't connect due to your quick reflexes. A dog with this type of history must be evaluated; call a behaviorist, now.

SHE'S HERE!

Before the baby comes home, have Dad or Grandma bring home a blanket or a towel that the baby used. Do not wash them. Leave them around within easy reach of the dog's nose. Let him become familiar with the scent. Encourage him as he curiously investigates the scent. Be upbeat and positive; "That's our new baby! She's coming home tomorrow. You're just gonna love her!"

If you are considering home birth, the dog should not be present for the actual birth. Board him with a neighbor or have someone supervise the dog, taking him for long walks to make sure he's fully exercised. If he's crate trained, confine him. Wait until things settle down before introductions. Then let the dog sniff articles the baby has been in contact with. This can happen in a matter of hours after the event.

BOWSER MEETS BABY: THE INTRODUCTION

Mom, greet the dog without the baby in tow. Give him a genuine hello, let him know you're OK. Let the dog sniff you up and down; he'll pick up the baby's scent on you. Pay close attention to his responses.

After the initial excitement has calmed down and all is quiet, have one person hold the baby, while whomever the dog is closest to and obeys most readily has the dog on leash. Sit the dog and praise him. The dog should be close enough to see, but not touch, the infant. Frequent short sessions during the first day are recommended. Gradually bring the dog closer, paying attention to his responses. If the dog is under verbal control and calm after several introductions, try it without the leash.

Now you can allow the dog to wander loose in the room while the baby is being held. Feel free to pet the dog while you hold the baby, and don't forget that praise!

LIFE WITH BOWSER AND BABY

Never, ever leave your child unsupervised with your dog. No matter how well you know your dog, accidents happen. Newborn infants are far more fragile than newborn puppies; even with the most maternal of instincts, the dog can unintentionally injure or worse case scenario, kill your baby. A dog's predatory drive may be triggered by the sounds, smells and movements of infants and children. More likely, dogs are unaware of their own strength, and can cause injury when playful and excited. You can not afford to take risks. Do not leave your child alone with the dog!

Make time daily to have "fun" with the dog without the baby present. Play-training sessions, fetch, or any other positive interactive games are all good choices. You must not, however, play any of the following games if your dog has any dominance-related behavior problems: tug of war, wrestling, or games involving chasing people or animals. While they may seem like games to you, tug-of-war, wrestling, and chase games all tell the dog that he's in charge. Canine friendships can be loyal and true if you realize that dogs cannot understand the concept of equality. In the canine world there are leaders and followers — you must be your dog's leader.

Take time daily to have fun with the dog while the baby is present! If you are relaxed and happy around the dog, the dog can be relaxed and happy around you. Include the dog during feeding times by giving him a chew toy to enjoy while you nurse your new baby nearby.

Dogs and kids; it's the American Dream. Unfortunately it can also be the American Nightmare! Growing up with animals can give our children some of the most positive lessons life has to offer, from self-respect and self-control to sharing, caring and the experience of unconditional love. The dream can come true with careful planning, training and awareness.

Elizabeth Teal
©ASPCA, Revised 2001