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Baby Training Your Dog

Pregnant? Thinking of becoming pregnant? Adopting? Bringing home a new baby? Training your dog to accept a new baby makes the dog safer and makes the baby safer. It's important to think of this as not only protecting your baby from your dog, but also as protecting your dog from your baby. A dog that is seen as aggressive or too rough with a baby usually ends up being rehomed, relinquished to a shelter, or euthanized. This is pretty miserable for both the dog and the owners. Please know that each case is *very* individual and no one can map out a full baby-training program on a webpage. Also know that *anyone* who claims to provide a "complete" online baby training protocol is doing you a disservice. Protocols need to be individualized to your specific situation. So, let's talk about when, why, and how to baby train your dog.

WHEN: Start *months* before the addition of the baby. Please don't wait until the last minute—these programs take time to be effective. Finding out how your dog is likely to act around babies, crawlers, toddlers, and preschoolers. It is very important that you have this information **EARLY** so you know what to do. Waiting until the day the baby is born gives you *no* time (and gives the dog no time) to learn what's expected.

WHY: You want to have time to discover how the dog acts, to desensitize the dog to the sights, sounds, and smells of a new baby, and to encourage the dog to be calm and relaxed around a new baby, and train the dog to see the baby as a human, not a puppy, another dog, or a toy.

I. How does your dog act?

- a. Has your dog met babies before? How did it behave? Was it calm? Curious? Barky? Puppy-nippy (tried to pinch and pull the baby's clothing to play)? Snappy (snapped near the baby in a non-play, defensive or aggressive manner)? Aggressive (growled and tried to bite the baby)? Can't tell the difference? Contact a behaviorist for help.
- b. Has your dog met toddlers before? How did it behave? Tried to play (showed a play bow and bouncy behavior)? Showed growling, snarling, or tail-tucked behavior? Ran away from the crawler?

II. Don't have access to babies and toddlers for above scenario (I)? Use models:

- a. Purchase a baby doll that looks like a newborn. Find one that cries, coos, and laughs when you press its tummy or move it. In front of your dog, treat the doll like a baby and

have it make sounds. Present it to the dog while holding the doll in your arms, in your lap, and then by laying the doll on the floor.

- i. The dog *doesn't* think this is a baby. It smells like plastic. Some dogs think it is a play-toy, and will try to use it as a toy. But research shows that dogs who are excessively reactive to novel objects (growls, barks, retreats/approaches while barking, snaps at or nips at the doll) are likely to be snappy toward children. The baby doll isn't seen as a "living baby," but it serves as a model for reactivity. The dogs who get snappy, growly, bark excessively, and/or react and approach defensively really need help. For dogs like that, you want a professional to help you.
- b. Toddler Doll: Most easily found are My Size Barbie™ and Wispy Walker dolls. Again, these life-sized dolls don't smell like humans, but we are looking for that "reactivity" level. Hold the doll by the neck and "walk" it toward the dog. Put a treat in the doll's hand and have it "feed" the dog. Extend one of the doll's arms and have it try to "pet" the dog. Again, research shows that the dogs who are excessively reactive to novel objects are likely to be snappy toward children. So, the toddler doll isn't seen as a "living child," but it serves as a model for reactivity. If your dog is reactive (growls, barks, retreats/approaches while barking, snaps at or nips at the doll), ask a professional for help.

HOW: Each dog and family is different, so there just isn't a "one size fits all" program. Here are some general ideas to plan to do, however.

- I. Before the Baby—Desensitize to Baby Routines: Practice feeding a baby doll, changing a baby doll, playing with a baby doll. Use a doll that makes noise to get the dog used to the sounds. Bring baby odors, baby sounds, baby activities, friends' babies into the house and let the dog get used to them. Use barriers (gates, leashes, etc.) as necessary for safety. Offer treats when babies are present. If your dog is a calm, relaxed dog, let the dog sniff the baby. If the dog is a gentle treat taker, manipulate the baby's hand and have the baby "offer treats" to the dog. If the dog is a mouthy treat taker, have the dog be held by someone and help the friend's baby "toss" treats to the dog. *Safety First*—keep things calm and under control. Stay at distances where the dog can stay calm, and then allow the dog to move a little closer, while under physical control. Use short periods of time (3-5 mins or less) with lots of separation breaks as needed. Watch for the dog to drop or raise its tail, flatten its ears, show whites of its eyes, and use those cues for when to have a greater distance separation, and when to stop for a while.
- II. Dog Gates, Dog Gates, Dog Gates (or Child Gates): The ASPCA reports that children under *12 years of age* should never be left alone with a dog. If you cannot supervise your dog with your new baby or with your children, separate them! Don't let yourself become overwhelmed or distracted when life throws one of those "everything-is-happening-at-once" curve balls: The baby is crying, the phone is ringing, someone is ringing the doorbell, the dinner is burning, and the dog is barking. First thing—FIRST THING—put the dog someplace where it is physically separated from the baby or toddler, answer the door, and let the answering machine answer the phone (in that order).

III. Safety-Zone: Dogs can be trained to self-regulate and self-monitor their own behavior. If a dog starts to feel anxious, it can learn to go to its “safe place.” The dog’s own emotional state can act as a cue (just like “Sit” is a cue) to retreat to the designated “Safety Zone.” That way if the baby is fussy and the dog becomes anxious, it will take itself to its Safety Zone. This training takes time (start early—before there’s a need for it), and all the steps can’t be presented here. Consult a professional trainer or behaviorist for help with this. Train the child to avoid that area, or else the safety zone will be ineffective. The baby or toddler is *not* allowed in the Safety Zone—ever!!! If you can’t train the child, put up a child-safe barrier that the dog can get through but the child cannot.

The most critical point is to *be proactive*. Start early, practice often. Get help from a professional if you need it.

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