



## **A New Member of the Pack**

Introducing your dog to your new baby

*By Molly Stone, Dip. A.B; CDBC; CC-SF/SPCA  
Animal Behavior Specialist, SPCA of Wake County, 2005*

Dogs and children can be absolutely wonderful for each other. A properly fostered canine/kid relationship will be rewarding for the pooch, the child, and maybe most importantly, the parents. There are some things new parents can do to help their children and their pets start out on the right foot together.

Firstly, one of the most common problems that dog-owners-turned-parents run into is that their dogs become disgruntled and depressed at the amount of time their People are suddenly spending doing things other than tending to their canine needs. A sudden change like this can certainly leave a dog, who's been a member of the familial pack for its whole life, feeling displaced and confused. One simple way to avoid this problem is to make a concerted effort *not* to spend special time with the dog once the new baby has been put to bed for the night. Frequently, new parents are so busy with their new parental tasks that while the baby is awake and in need of attention; the faithful dog is all but forgotten. A better idea, instead, is to foster in the dog's mind the idea that his life is very much enhanced by the presence of the new baby. There are some simple exercises that, if applied as soon as the baby comes home, will quickly help the dog understand that this new pack member is a "good thing" indeed. New parents should work as a team to implement the following steps, alternating roles as time allows.

- One parent sits in a room with the dog for 5-7 minutes. During this time, there should be no television or radio playing, and no toys for the dog to entertain himself with. Additionally, as difficult as it may be, no attention should be paid to the dog whatsoever. To effectively ignore a dog, one must abjectly avoid verbal, physical, and eye contact. This may annoy the dog greatly, especially at first, and he may go to rather extreme lengths to engage his Person's attention. Barking, jumping, nose nudging, pacing, and whining are all commonly observed behaviors during execution of this routine. No matter how hard he tries, however, the dog's efforts to gain his owner's attention must fail.
- After 5-7 minutes, the second parent should enter the room with the new baby and stay for 60-90 seconds only. During that minute to minute-and-a-half, the dog should be showered with praise, affection, play, food reinforcements, and general bliss. Once the "party time" is over, one parent should remove the baby from the room and the other should immediately return to ignoring the dog.
- In order for this exercise to be the most effective, it should be repeated at least 8 times daily, until the dog begins to "get the hang of it." Eventually, owners will notice that when the baby comes into the room, the dog

brightens, wags his tail, and is clearly pleased that the new family member has entered. When this “doggie joy” is observed, it is time to begin very gradually reducing the number of minutes the dog spends in the room being ignored, while gradually increasing the amount of time spent with the baby present.

Another similar and useful exercise is to designate one wonderfully compelling dog toy or bone to be the “Baby Time Treat.” I very highly recommend a beef femur stuffed with peanut butter, tuna fish, braunschweiger, liverwurst, or cheese; then frozen for at least three hours. Pre-stuffed femurs that can be purchased at the pet store are not going to be effective! It is important that the filling is extremely delicious and extremely special, and the preservative-and-chemical-filled junk that comes in the pre-stuffed bones does not fool dogs. This incredible treat should be something the dog is allowed to have *only* when the new baby is in the room, and it should be removed from the dog, and from his sight entirely, when the baby leaves. The filling in the bone will need to be replaced frequently. Care should be taken that only the dog’s absolute favorite things are used.

\*\*\* (IMPORTANT SAFETY NOTE...once your baby starts crawling around on his or her own, it’s time to put away the special bone! We don’t want Rover deciding the newly-mobile baby is threatening his treasure, after all!) \*\*\*

Another fine way to send the important “Babies are Wonderful!” message to a dog is to make absolutely sure that the baby is present whenever the dog’s needs are about to be met, and whenever he is going to receive something he wants. Before the dog is let in or out, the owner should go and get the baby. Before the dog is fed, given a treat, groomed, given a toy, etc., the baby should be in the room. It can be tricky to coordinate this exercise, but if it is carefully and consistently implemented, it can cause the dog to believe quite firmly that he “needs” the baby present in order for the best things in his life to occur. Therefore, an owner may find that the dog is actually becoming protective of the child, rather than annoyed by the child’s presence. In order to preserve consistency and be as successful as possible, it may even require waking the baby and fetching him from his nap when it’s time to take care of the dog. Consistency and repetition are the keys to good training and behavior modification, but take heart – these exercises need not be repeated for the entire lifetime of the child!

Commonly, new parents are terrified at the idea of their dog getting “too close” to the baby. One important thing to remember is that dogs explore their environments with their noses. The new family member certainly qualifies as a substantial change in the environment, and it is natural for a dog to want to sniff and lick the child. A good way to allow the dog to indulge his natural desire to investigate without ending up with a soaking-wet baby is to *praise* the dog for visiting the child, then call him away after a few seconds and offer him a food reinforcement immediately. A solid basic obedience background will be of profound value here. If, instead, the new parents are panicky and edgy whenever the dog attempts to interact with the child, and if they in fact correct

the dog for “getting too close,” the dog will quickly learn that being around the child gets him in trouble, and makes his People upset. The association the dog makes with the baby will be anything but a positive one, and that will be counter-productive to creating a mutually fond dog-child relationship.

Once news of a pending child travels to friends and family members, it is common for gifts of “assembly-required” items to begin arriving at the house. Another simple and excellent way to communicate to the dog that he is welcome to participate in the changes taking place in his environment is to put these items together, (the walker, the swing, the bouncy-things, the crib and cradle, the stroller, car seat, etc.,) and leave them out where they are accessible to the dog. In fact, picking the lighter items up and walking around with them, and occasionally re-arranging the placement of the “new baby stuff” will be helpful as well. Whenever the dog decides to sniff and/or investigate these new additions to the household, he can again be praised, then brightly called away and offered a food reinforcement. Once more, the message we’re striving to deliver to the dog is, “The baby’s things are fun to see, **and** fun to leave alone.” Again, the parents-to-be should take care to avoid panicking when the dog is showing interest in the baby’s belongings.

A baby monitor intercom can also become a source of extremely high-value reinforcement for the dog, and even the catalyst of a rewarding interactive activity. Whenever the baby’s voice comes over the intercom, the new Parents should joyously alert the dog. (“Hey! Listen! The baby’s awake!”) Then, the dog should be invited to accompany the Parents to the child’s room, where the dog should be given a wonderful food reinforcement. If this exercise is repeated consistently, new parents frequently find that their dog becomes a more effective “baby monitor” than the intercom itself, as whenever the dog hears the child’s voice, he alerts the humans and goes directly to the child’s door to await them.

While the new Mama is in the hospital awaiting discharge, the new Daddy can do a few simple pre-homecoming exercises with the dog as well, to help ready him for the upcoming “event.” Receiving blankets that have been wrapped around the baby can be, instead, wrapped around a doll, and brought into the home. The dog should be allowed to sniff and investigate the bundle, but if he jumps or becomes agitated, Dad should gasp in horror, or even “yelp” like a wounded puppy, and abruptly leave the scene. Note: No Corrections Should Be Used! The idea is to have our over-excited pooch quickly understand that when he gets too “enthusiastic,” he causes himself to be left alone. Dad should return after ignoring the dog (no talking, touching, or looking!) for 30 seconds at the most, and then again, allow the dog to sniff and investigate the bundle. Once the initial greeting at the door is finished, Dad can begin practicing some of the exercises described above with the “fake baby,” which will be a good rehearsal for the days to come, after the “real” baby arrives!

The dog will NOT mistake the “fake” baby for the Real McCoy, (or the real Jones, or the real Atkins, as the case may be.) The point of this is to get the dog used to the new routines that accompany the arrival of the “real thing.”

In fact, it’s a good idea to employ a lifelike doll for several weeks before the real-*live* doll comes home. Mom and Dad can carry the doll in swaddling clothes around the house, change its diapers, put it in the baby swing, put it down for a nap, get it settled in the highchair -- all of the things they may be doing with the “real baby” once he or she comes home from the hospital. The more accustomed the dog is to these new routines before Baby arrives, the better. (Besides, it’s not bad practice for the new parents!)

The preceding is a program that should be helpful if consistently applied immediately before and immediately after the new baby’s arrival, and during the first few months of his or her life. It is not intended for implementation in households with toddlers or older children. (That’s a whole different .txt file!)