

Kids and Dogs

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The very image of a child playing happily with a dog is so appealing that many advertisers use it to help sell their products. Indeed, it is a pleasure to see. Unfortunately, not all dog-child interactions are quite so peaceful. Several thousand children are bitten by dogs each year.. Certainly some of these interactions are unavoidable, but the large majority of them should have been avoidable. Dogs do not seem to perceive infants, and sometimes toddlers, small humans. While we may not understand this, look at it from the dog's perspective. They look quite different, sound different and, without a doubt, smell different! Also, they do not react with body language that dogs can "read". A screaming toddler running wildly with his hands in the air is a "threat" from a body language perspective. A dog which is not completely calm-natured will, at least initially, be unnerved by such a display. With regular exposure to infant and toddler behavior, most dogs will learn to accept or ignore, or at least tolerate it. "Nervous" or "dominant" dogs may not. So, are kids and dogs a bad combination? No, but a few precautions should always be taken when introducing the two, especially for the first time.

When introducing a newborn baby to a dog try to put yourself in the dog's place. The household where he, or she, has lived alone with the two of you has a pretty established routine. Now, all of a sudden, there is a wriggling, crying, odd-looking, smelly intruder who seems to be getting the majority of the attention. Perhaps even the usual walk or play-time has been shortened or eliminated. This is quite a rude awakening to many dogs. In order to try to make the transition a bit easier, there are a few simple steps to undertake.

When you are anticipating a baby's arrival, gradually have your partner take over some of the dog's routine care (walks, feeding, training, play time.) This is a great time to be certain that your dog is obedience trained, with a minimum of sit, stay, come, and down commands well mastered. Some behaviorists advocate carrying a doll wrapped in a blanket to simulate an infant while reinforcing the dog's basic obedience commands. Using the word "baby" frequently may also make the dog more accustomed to a word that will be new to him. Now is the time to adjust the dog's activity and feeding schedule to that which will follow the baby's arrival.

While you are in the hospital for the delivery have your partner take home an item that the baby has been in contact with (blanket, T-shirt etc.) so the dog can get accustomed to the new smell. When you arrive home, realize that the dog may be overwhelmed by your return as well as by the new baby. It's a good idea for you to greet and fuss with your K-9 family member while someone else temporarily holds the baby. When you're satisfied that your dog is not as anxious, let him or her be introduced to the new baby. (You obviously must decide for yourself what level of actual contact the dog may have with the baby.) Take note that many animal behaviorists feel that dogs which are the greatest threat to a newborn baby are those who have previously exhibited aggression (especially if it has been toward children), and those who are predatory (stalks and/or kills wild animals or other objects.) In any case, it's best to never leave any dog alone with a baby until you are absolutely confident that the dog poses no threat whatever to the baby.

As time progresses, the infant will grow into a toddler. Toddlers pose their own problems for dogs. They are often unsteady on their feet, have a fascination with the dog and often, as a result, are inadvertently rough with or abusive to your pet. Since this phase of child development is unavoidable, it's best to establish some rules with the dog. I prefer that the dog accept the rule that if he doesn't like what the child is doing, he should leave the

situation. This way the dog will realize that a bump, growl, or "nip" will never be acceptable. Teach the child proper respect for the dog as well, but don't rely on him or her to have the better judgement.

Finally, in order to keep the peace, remember to spend at least five to ten minutes each day devoted entirely to the dog. This will hopefully defuse some of the natural jealousy, and remind your dog that he is a member of the family as well. Hopefully with a little bit of work and attention, the child and the dog will not only co-exist peacefully, but they will grow to become lifelong friends. If you have any other concerns, please remember to talk to your veterinarian, who will probably be happy to offer additional tips and advice.