

When Baby Makes Four

A little advance planning will help Fluffy adjust to Junior's arrival

By Kathy Lang, President & Training Director
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Many couples expecting their first child will bring baby home to a household with a dog (or two) greeting them at the door. Here are some tips to make the transition smooth and worry free, for both baby and dog.

Before the baby arrives:

Obedience train your dog. Take a class to help your dog learn manners and self-control. Resolve any behavior problems, such as housebreaking, separation anxiety and mouthing. A dog that's been trained to stay off the furniture, not jump on people, sit, down, come and walk nicely on leash will be easier to manage when the new baby arrives. Dogs that are not trained are much more likely to create tension in the household. When the poorly mannered dogs' unruly behavior is no longer tolerable, the dogs are often given away or placed in shelters. Not fair for the dog who was actually there first.

Set up the nursery. Arrange the furniture, buy the diapers, baby powder and lotion. Get a realistic-looking baby doll from the toy or thrift store. Make a recording of baby noises, either at a friend's house, daycare or hospital. Use the recording, diapers, powder and lotion to familiarize your dog to the scents, sounds and new activities. Allow your dog to smell the baby doll and get used to this little stand-in's place in your life. Train your dog what you want him to do when you're nursing, bathing, cuddling and the baby's sleeping. Practice taking your dog for walks next to the stroller. All this planning and training will help your dog adjust smoothly when the baby walks through the door.

Give your dog a special place. There will be times when you need to separate your dog and baby. Even the best trained and most tolerant dog needs time to relax away from the baby. Consider teaching your dog to nap in a kennel or crate. Use a baby gate to keep Fluffy in a separate room of the house. Put her bed, toys and water in there with her. Teach Fluffy that her toys are kept in a basket in her room of the house. This will help her differentiate between baby toys and dog toys. Turn on a radio or TV for background noise. Train your dog to go her special place when the baby needs extra attention, you need a nap or your house is suddenly filled with visitors.

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After the baby is born:

Maintain your dog's routine. Try to feed, walk and exercise your dog just as you had before Junior arrived. Enlist the help of a neighbor or family member if necessary. An occasional missed walk won't cause a problem, but if you significantly change your dog's schedule after the baby arrives, Fluffy may start to exhibit behavior problems just to get your attention. Dogs are like children in this regard. They'd rather be praised than punished, but they'd rather be punished than ignored.

Always supervise dogs and babies. Never leave a baby (or toddler) unattended with a dog, no matter how well behaved and sweet the dog might be. Your baby might make a noise your dog has never heard before. Fluffy goes to investigate and jumps up on the crib, knocking it to the ground. Think of all the possible things that might go wrong when you're not around.

Give your dog a job. Help your dog continue to feel like an important part of the family by giving her assignments throughout the day. Ask her to do a sit stay while you change a diaper, then reward her good behavior with praise and a treat.

Enlist professional assistance. If, despite all your good training and planning, Fluffy is having difficulty adjusting to the baby, contact a dog trainer or your veterinarian for guidance. There's often a simple solution requiring a small change in routine, training or expectations.

About the author: Kathy Lang has been training dogs and teaching people since 1977. She and her staff at Family Dog Training Center offer a wide range of training classes and private lessons at their facility in Kent. For more information, contact them at (425) 291-9663 or visit their website at www.familydogonline.com.