

Making Babies? First, Make Baby-Ready Pets

Shelters help prepare pet-loving expectant parents

BY JAMES HETTINGER



Founding Father Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying it first: Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

This particular “father” probably wasn’t thinking about pet owners prepping for the arrival of a newborn child, but he might as well have been.

To successfully bring a child into a house with pets, it’s crucial for expectant parents to plan ahead and help their pets adjust to new routines well before the baby gets there. Otherwise, the results can be less-than-ideal or even tragic: Parents, overwhelmed by their new responsibilities or fearing for their child’s safety, might surrender their pets—or worse yet, a pet might injure or even kill an infant.

It was just such a tragic incident in Rhode Island in 2005—in which a family dog killed a

5-day-old baby—that inspired Jane Deming, then the education director for the Providence Animal Rescue League, to start a program to help new parents keep the peace between their furry “kids” and the hairless one coming home from the hospital.

Deming heard a radio report of the child’s death while she was on vacation. She thought about all the dogs and cats who get surrendered due to a new baby; when she returned to work, she found 16 such cats in her shelter. She also recalled a new mother who, in tears, had relinquished a Chesapeake Bay retriever after the dog scratched her baby’s thighs. “He was just a big, goofy, out-of-control, wonderful dog. And she was so torn, but her husband said, ‘The dog goes today.’”

Deming hatched an idea for a workshop that would show expectant parents how to prepare their pets and keep their newborns safe, with the ultimate goal of reducing bite-related injuries and fatalities as well as the number of pets relinquished on account of children. She got the support of her director and recruited her friend Katenna Jones, who was then the behaviorist for the Rhode Island SPCA.

They created a two-hour seminar—the Baby-Ready Pets program—that proved to be an immediate hit with local audiences. Deming says every class was full. “It’s the only time I ever presented programs ... where when it was over people hugged us with relief,” she says, noting that people welcomed the chance to discuss their fears related to children and pets.

[behavior department]

Deming and Jones presented seminars locally for about a year, and eventually got a grant from the Rhode Island Foundation to take the program nationwide. They developed a package for others who had heard of the program (largely via the Internet) and wanted to give it a try. The packages—which included a workshop DVD, a binder of materials, and a CD of baby sounds—sold out, spreading the program to about 130 shelters in 40 states plus Canada, Deming says.

She and Jones are no longer affiliated with the Baby-Ready Pets program; they've both moved on to the American Humane Association, where Deming is the director of humane education, and Jones is a humane educator/animal behaviorist. As of early 2010, the program kit (including an instruction manual, master copies of handouts, a dog and cat training DVD, and a bite safety coloring book, as well as the DVD of workshops and the CD of baby sounds) was still available for \$45 from the ASPCA at aspcaonlinestore.com.

Shelters offering the program say it's filling a niche, providing commonsense advice not often covered in parenting classes and easing the transition as pet-loving families welcome new, human bundles of joy.

Who's Your Baby?

The transition can be a tough one for a pet who's used to being the center of attention at home.

"A lot of times we find that families have treated their animals like their babies for quite some time, and when a real, human one comes along, it can create issues with the animal and how the household is structured," says Jennifer Self-Aulgur, humane education coordinator for the Humane Society of Kent County in Grand Rapids, Mich., which has offered Baby-Ready Pets workshops for about two years.

Dogs in particular are creatures of habit, Jones explains, and the arrival of a child upsets their normal routines. New parents who previously had plenty of time for walks, car rides, and belly rubs are suddenly focused on the baby. For the pet, it's like yanking away a Band-Aid of attention and interaction, Jones says. "The dog was snuggling on the couch in the person's lap, and now the baby's there."

The change often upsets the dog—not because he's jealous or resentful of the baby,



Jennifer Self-Aulgur, right, humane education coordinator for the Humane Society of Kent County, says the Baby-Ready Pets program has helped decrease the number of pets surrendered because of the arrival of a newborn. Also pictured with two recent workshop participants are Namiko Ota-Noveskey, left, a behavior specialist at the humane society, and Self-Aulgur's dog, Hemi, who serves as a demonstration dog during the workshops.

Jones says, but simply because he doesn't understand what's happening. The puzzled dog will often resort to negative attention seeking or revert to puppy-like behavior such as chewing, soiling in the house, or marking. Such behavior is perfectly natural, Jones says, though people tend to anthropomorphize it as anger toward the baby. In reality, she explains, it's the dog's way of saying, "I don't understand what's happening. I need to get your attention in any way that I can, because I'm not getting your attention anymore."

Such inappropriate behavior can land the dog in a shelter, Jones notes, but owners can avoid that outcome by making sure the pet gets adequate attention and exercise. New parents will inevitably have to reduce the quantity of time they spend with their pets, but they can increase the quality. "So instead of hanging out and petting the dog for 45 minutes on the couch, take him for a 20-minute run," Jones suggests. "That's less direct contact, but much better contact. Instead of walking down the hall and patting him on the head every two seconds, take him out back and throw the Frisbee for an hour."

Understanding the Risks

It's important for new parents to realize just how dangerous their pets can be—even if they're small, cute, and cuddly.

"One of the biggest things we stress is that you never, ever leave your baby alone with your animal. That's just something you don't do, because it could only take a second for a dog, or even a cat, to inflict injury on a child," says Self-Aulgur.

Dogs and cats are natural predators, Deming notes. For dogs in particular, a baby—lacking normal motor and communication skills—doesn't look much like a person, so it can easily trigger an animal's prey drive. "It actually probably looks more like a wounded rabbit than it does a human being," she notes, "and it's definitely not part of the family unit."

Jones concurs: "A lot of times people think, 'Oh, my dog loves kids. He's great with kids. I don't have anything to worry about.' Well, a newborn baby is very different than a child walking across the street. Until the child is mobile, it's not considered a human by the dog."

Despite the danger, Deming and Jones say it's rare that pets can't be trained to adjust to the arrival of a new baby.

Jones recalls one family that had a cranky, 14-year-old dog who wasn't prepared to be around children, but the family did not want to give the dog up. Jones helped develop a management system for the home that included baby gates and crates in every room.

The dog got used to being crated or separated from the family by the gates. During times of separation, the family gave him frozen Kongs smeared with peanut butter, so he came to see separation as a reward rather than a punishment. "He's like, 'Hurry up and leave me alone so I can have my tasty treat,'" Jones says. She heard later that the child and dog had learned to keep a respectful distance from each other.

But that was a small dog, Jones notes. Another client had a Saint Bernard mix who was food-aggressive, stranger-aggressive, touch-sensitive, and known to resource-guard the couch and the bed. "I advised them that this dog can never be trusted. It's like having a gun in the house," Jones says. In such cases, families need to observe a variety of safety measures, such as providing constant supervision and knowing where the child and the dog are at all times. "If you're willing to put those management tools in place, you can make it work," Jones says. "But it is a lot of work. And most families are not willing to take that risk."

Baby Steps

Perhaps the most important message to impart to expectant parents with pets is simply this: Get moving before you're knee-deep in diapers. The time to train your pets and revise your household routines is months before you exit the maternity ward.

"We encourage people: Don't wait on these things until your baby's home, because you will be so overwhelmed, you will be so tired, your priorities will definitely change," says Tammy Walter, humane education coordinator for the Animal Rescue League of Southern Rhode Island, which started offering the Baby-Ready Pets program in early 2009. By the time the baby arrives, she adds, "You don't have that extra 15 minutes a day to stand there and do a little training session with your dog ... and that's why the pet ends up at the shelter."

If a room slated to become a nursery will be off-limits to pets, or if the dog will no longer be allowed on the couch or will spend more time in a crate, put those practices in place months before the child arrives. Making the changes ahead of time will help prevent pets from associating the new routines with the baby, Jones explains.



we can help you help them

Advance your animal protection career and enhance your academic credentials with the continuing education available at Humane Society University. Bachelors, Masters, and a variety of professional certification programs are available at humanesociety.org/university.

For more information, e-mail hsuonline@humanesociety.org.



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Enriching Animals | Confronting Cruelty

[behavior department]

New parents are bringing home a baby, and the baby will bring the noise. "It's not only that this new little human being comes into the house and disrupts everything," says Deming, "but they're noisy little buggers, too." And the crying, cooing, and gurgling can upset pets who aren't used to it.

To prevent pets from freaking out, the Baby-Ready Pets packet includes a CD of baby noises aimed at systematically desensitizing dogs, cats, birds, and other companion animals. People can play the CD at home, rewarding the pet for not reacting to it, Deming says. They gradually increase the volume and continue to say "Good dog" or "Good kitty," she explains, so that even loud noises don't prompt a reaction. When the real baby starts screaming, it's nothing the pet hasn't heard before.

Some pets might have issues with even the recorded crying. "For a dog who's experiencing that for the first time, you can't expect that they're just going to be sitting there wagging their tail," says Self-Aulgur. In such situations, she recommends playing the CD alongside soothing classical music to cushion the blow. Pet owners can gradually increase the volume of crying while decreasing the

volume of the classical music—giving the dog a little culture as he learns to not overreact to the baby sounds.

It's also helpful, immediately prior to the baby's arrival, for a family member to bring home either the blanket in which the newborn was swaddled or its second head cap, which has the baby's smells. These will help the pet get used to the baby's scent. Dogs will shove their nose into anything that smells interesting, Jones notes, and "It's better to do that with a blanket or a cap than with a newborn baby."

To further prepare pets for a baby's physical presence, Deming and Jones recommend that expectant parents get a baby doll and treat it like the real thing in the weeks before the real thing comes along—putting it in the crib, playing with it on the changing table, covering it with baby products, and even taking it for walks in a baby carriage, accompanied by the dog on a leash. If the dog gets tangled in the wheels or knocks the stroller over, the parents can make corrections to prevent mishaps with the real child.


That solution is preferable to simply never taking the dog for a walk with the stroller again, which Jones notes could cut into the dog's exercise time and lead to behavior problems. Another undesirable outcome, Jones notes, is that the dog thinks, "Well, I hate that carriage, because whenever I go with the carriage, I get in trouble," or "Whenever you have the carriage, I don't get to go for a walk."

Walter and her animal care and behavior specialist, Megen Gifford, conduct their workshops at South County Hospital in Wakefield, R.I., from 7 to 9 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month, typically attracting three or four couples. The hospital provides a small, comfortable conference room with cushioned chairs (something that's extremely important to pregnant women, Walter notes), where the instructors and participants sit around the

same table. Walter keeps the atmosphere casual, encouraging questions pertaining to the main portion of the presentation, and afterward handling queries about people's individual situations. The hospital originally offered a bigger room, but Walter finds a smaller space more conducive to sharing and learning. "To me, it's very important that people are comfortable ... because if they're not comfortable, they're not listening to you," she says.

Walter and Gifford show a PowerPoint presentation and also use a doll and a variety of baby items (such as blankets and lotions) to demonstrate the proper way to introduce a pet to a new baby. The instructors show people a selection of challenging toys for dogs and cats, which will help the pets work off some of the energy they'll have due to more limited interactions with their owners. The workshop participants go home with a folder containing worksheets on their particular type of pet, the recording of baby sounds, a list of local contacts such as trainers and pet sitters, and some suggested websites. Walter and Gifford hand out their business cards and encourage people to call if they have follow-up questions.

At the Humane Society of Kent County, the workshops follow a similar format, and Self-Aulgur says she's seen a decline in the number of pets surrendered because of new babies. "It's provided a service to our community that wasn't there before," she says of the workshops offered every other month on Saturday afternoons. "You can get books, you can read information online and things like that, but I think having the face-to-face discussion and then giving the follow-up support is really beneficial to the families we work with."

Expectant parents—likely fretting about everything from 3 a.m. feedings to the cost of a college education—can eliminate a few worries by spending a few months before the baby's arrival making sure their pets have heard a baby, smelled a baby, and learned how to act around one. "So instead of one incredibly intense, major, life-altering change, it's several small, very manageable changes," Jones says, "and it's no big deal." 



This kitty agrees: Pet-owning parents must provide constant supervision—and when necessary, intervention—for kids interacting with pets.