

Preparing Fluffy and Fido for Baby

Animal companions are an important aspect of many families; however, they are often overlooked when plans are being made for the arrival of a new baby in the family. People assume that their little Fluffy or Fido will accept this new bundle of joy coming into the household, and many dogs and cats will. Unfortunately, for some dogs and cats, the new addition takes over their territory and the attention of their human companions. The dog or cat, once the beloved child of the family, is now relegated to the backyard, basement, or locked in a room away from all the excitement. Naturally, resentment can occur.

Luckily, this resentment can be avoided with careful planning and preparation prior to bringing your baby home. The following are some steps to consider taking to help your animal companions accept the baby's arrival. If baby is already in the home, skip to step 7 and implement immediately.

1. **Temperament:** Know your animal and his or her temperament. Has your dog ever snapped before? Does your cat lash out at strangers or just hide? Is your dog protective of food or you? *If your animal has ever shown any aggressive tendencies, you should consult a professional animal behaviorist for advice.*
2. **Socialize:** If your animal companion hasn't had the opportunity to be around children, invite some friends over with their children so that your furry friend will have the opportunity to experience little people. Children move quicker and pet rougher, and your animal needs to get used to this type of handling. Watch very closely for any aggressive reactions.
3. **Training:** Your dog should go through training classes to learn the basics of sit, down, come, and stay. These commands will come in handy when you need to focus your attention on the baby. It will allow the dog to be present in the same room as you and your baby and give you control of the situation. Cats can be trained too, and should learn what furniture is off limits. A simple "hiss" sound and a squirt bottle can be used to help teach the cat some manners. If your cat is skittish, keep any admonishment to a minimum and always use lots of praise for desired behavior.
4. **Rules:** Establish rules prior to the baby coming home. If certain areas of the house will become off-limits when the baby arrives, start teaching this immediately. If the dog or cat was once allowed on the bed and will no longer be when the baby comes home, introduce this new rule now. The idea is that you don't want any new restrictions to be associated with the baby coming into the house or your beloved animal companion may resent the baby and act out in unpleasant ways, so make all changes long before the new baby comes home.
5. **Practice:** Role-play what you will be doing with the baby, so the furry members of the family will become accustomed to your new ways. Get a baby doll and wrap it in a blanket. Carry the doll around. Take it to the changing table and put your dog in a sit-stay while you change the baby. Put the doll on the floor on a blanket with baby toys around and put your dog in a down stay in a section of the room just for the dog. Make a certain area of the room off-limits to the baby, so your dog will have a place to go away from ear-pulling when the baby begins to crawl. (For cats, this is easier as they can jump up high away from baby.) Establish this place from the beginning. It can also be used as for a place to send the dog to chew on a toy when you need time to be with just the baby. The dog will associate this place with good things, not a time-out from family fun.
6. **Introductions:** When your baby is born, have someone bring home a blanket that the baby was wrapped in so that the furry members of the family can get used to this new scent. Have a neutral person--grandma or a neighbor--actually carry the new baby into the house to leave Mom and Dad free to greet the family animals. Remember Mom has been away for a few days, and the dog or cat (especially dogs, as cats tend to hide during the excitement) will be happy to see her and a bit excited. Once the excitement dies down, let your animals get acquainted with the baby. Sit in a comfortable chair and let your dog or cat sniff the baby. Most people don't want their animals to lick the baby, but this is their way of getting to know someone. The baby will come in contact with more germs from well-wishers than from your animals, so let them have a little taste. Cats often rub against objects to claim them as their own, so let your cat rub the baby—it's a good thing! Of course, have another person nearby to redirect an excited animal's behavior with a toy.
7. **Play times:** Be sure to establish some play times with your cat or dog *when the baby is PRESENT--not just when the baby is napping in another room.* People often make the mistake of paying attention to the animals only when the baby gone. The cat or dog then associates the baby being gone as a good thing. If Mom and Dad reverse this by being fun *only* when the baby is around and ignore the animal when the baby is gone, then your animal companions will want the baby in the room. Soon they will be best buds with the baby because the baby gets them what they want.
8. **Supervision:** Always, always provide constant supervision with animals and children no matter how much you trust your animal friends. Accidents can always happen even with the most trustworthy animals.