

YOUR NEW BABY AND YOUR DOG

Here are some tips from Chris Troughton BVetMed MRCVS, principal vet at Cardiff's Heath Veterinary Group, about how to prepare for the arrival of your new baby.

You get ready for your new baby for months - and it's important to think about preparing your dog for the impending changes at home.

Don't leave your preparations until the last minute - you should think about making small changes from as soon as your pregnancy is confirmed. It's very important that your dog does not associate your baby's arrival with any reduction in the attention for himself or removal of any privileges. So start to make changes in routine early on - for example, if he is presently allowed upstairs, but you anticipate not allowing that when baby arrives, stop it now.

There are some simple things you can do which will make life so much easier later on and will help to stop your dog from becoming jealous.

Exercise:

First of all let's think about a new mum taking a dog and baby in a pushchair out for walks. Before baby is born, take your dog and pushchair out for a walk - this will get him or her used to walking with a pushchair and won't come as a shock to your dog when you've got baby to think of too. Do not attach the lead to the pushchair - if your dog gets spooked and bolts it could end in disaster.

Start to think about how much exercise your dog needs every day and whether this will continue once baby is born. If it's not going to be possible to keep up your dog's exercise routine, then you could try to start curtailing your dog's walks - then when baby arrives it's not going to be a shock when they are reduced.

You could think of calling on relatives, friends or a dog walker to take your dog out before baby arrives so it gets used to being taken out by other people. When baby arrives your dog shouldn't feel shut out when you are not able to walk it regularly.

Changes in the home: If you plan to use a baby gate at the bottom of the stairs to keep your dog downstairs, put the gate up months before baby is due - your dog will be used to it by the time baby arrives. Likewise, if there are rooms you don't want him or her to go into, start barring him from the room months before baby arrives. Get your pet used to baby's things - introduce carry cots, high chairs, playpens, bouncing cradles and rockers, prams and cribs during the months before the birth so the dog gets used to them being in the house.

Behaviour issues: You should NEVER EVER leave any baby or child alone with your dog - you may think that your dog is the most affectionate, loving and docile pet in the world but nevertheless, it's not to be trusted. You have to think about your dog's behaviour - is it calm? Does it jump up? Consider brushing up on some training during the pregnancy to make sure he or she returns when called, will not pull on the lead, and will lie still when you tell it to. If you are having problems getting your dog to behave, then consult your vet who will recommend a pet behaviourist or dog trainer. It's important to get these issues resolved before baby arrives. If this is your first baby and your dog has effectively been the 'child' in the household, then you have to get it used to receiving less attention before the birth. This is going to be difficult for some owners who have given their undivided attention to their dog. Get him or her used to being on their own for short periods. If you feel your dog is not responding then seek help from your vet - don't be complacent and think it will be all right when baby is brought home.

Your dog's health:

Roundworm can cause serious health problems in children so it is vital you are up to date with worming treatment. Ideally dogs should be wormed against roundworm every month if there are children around. Ask your vet for the most suitable treatment for your dog. Your dog should also be up to date with its annual boosters and flea treatment. If it's not then contact your vet who will arrange to start a two-injection course which will help to prevent Parvovirus, Distemper, Adenovirus, Parainfluenza and Leptospirosis. Your vet can also advise the best treatment to prevent flea infestations.

Bringing baby home:

By now you should have all your preparations in place – your dog should be obedient and used to having baby's bits and pieces around. After baby is born you could take home his or her clothing or a blanket from hospital to familiarise the dog with its smell, although this may not be possible because some new mums and babies are discharged from hospital hours after birth. When baby is due to return home, recruit one of your walkers to take your dog out so you can arrive home and settle baby into the nursery. This way mum will be greeting the dog – which will be excited to see her - without baby in her arms and hopefully the dog will be tired after a good walk. Let your dog get used to the smells and sounds of baby before you introduce them. A dog's sense of smell is far more acute than humans and babies do have their own sweet smell. When your dog appears to be relaxed you can introduce your baby. One parent should hold baby and the other should be in charge of the dog. Put your dog in sit/stay position and it should be on a lead. Make the dog stand about 15 feet away from baby and then gradually bring them closer together – this process could take some time. If your dog remains calm you could consider allowing the dog to sniff baby from a distance. If the dog becomes excited moving closer should not be attempted. Abandon the process and try it again when it's calmer. A baby crying can be a strong motivator for the dog to attack – it is similar to the cry made by injured prey, so avoid making introductions when baby is crying, and be particularly vigilant when baby is crying. There are CDs of baby noises available online – the advice is to play the CD on low volume for short periods, turning up the volume gradually and for longer periods. Please note if your dog has been aggressive in the past, or you have a rescue dog and are unsure about its past behaviour, seek advice from a specialist dog behaviourist before you start to introduce your baby. The decision to allow your dog off the lead when it's around baby is a difficult one – when you are confident the dog is not getting excited when it's around the new arrival and responds to your commands you can consider taking the step.

You must never under any circumstances leave dog and baby unattended.

If you start planning from the off, things should run smoothly and build the foundations of a strong relationship between your child and dog.

There is nothing more heart-warming than seeing a young child helping to bring their dog into the surgery for its checks. Your dog is a vital part of your family and the close bond it will build with your children will enrich your lives.

The Heath Veterinary Group has surgeries in Rhiwbina, Cyncoed, Whitchurch Road and Danescourt. If you require more information or have any concerns, please telephone 029 2062 1511 to make an appointment.