

HOW TO BABY PROOF YOUR PET

New parents unwittingly do a hundred little things wrong when they bring an infant home to Fido or Boots -- by Julia Glass

Picture the event from his point of view. For all these years, he's considered himself the unquestioned center of your life. He's kept vigil at the foot of your bed, awakened you every morning with a devotedly dank nose or fond left hook. You and your husband may have even used him as a dress rehearsal for parenthood, a way of trying on various fashions of nurture and discipline.

Did he mind? Of course not. Your dog or cat loves you unconditionally. But now, in you walk with this squalling, drooling, rubber-faced little alien. The nerve of you. The heartbreaking, traitorous nerve of you.

Perhaps you've heard that you should simply get rid of a pet when you have a baby. But this is rarely necessary, for most pets will adjust to the change. What's more, an animal in the family can give your child a special relationship from infancy on, provided you observe certain plans and precautions.

FOR BOTH DOGS AND CATS

* Well before baby's arrival, have your pet spend time around toddlers and babies; they sound, move, and smell different from adults. Invite friends and relatives to visit with their babies. Once your animal is calm, talk to him in warm, reassuring tones as you cradle the infant. This is new body language for your pet to interpret, and he needs to get used to it.

* As soon as you know you're expecting, take your pet for a checkup. Your vet will want to make sure the animal is free of parasites and up-to-date on vaccinations. Also, many latent medical disorders become aggravated when an animal is under stress, and it's wise to catch and treat a problem before the disruptions of a newborn's arrival cause it to surface. And if you've been putting off having your pet neutered, do so now. This procedure not only benefits your animal's health (reducing risk of certain cancers and other costly diseases) but often has a stabilizing effect on temperament.

* An infant's cries often disturb dogs more than cats. Dogs are more social creatures, and for some, a crying infant arouses the urge to answer this plea for help. Your dog may run frantically around the room, whining or barking, imploring you with his eyes. "The dog is saying, 'What can I do? How can I fix it? Is there danger?'" says Peter Borchelt, Ph.D., founder of Animal Behavior Consultants, Inc., in New York City.

* Make a recording of a baby crying (before you have the real thing), and play it occasionally. Don't force your pet to stay if he tries to flee. When he does stay near you, stroke him and speak in soothing tones. He'll get the message that you have things under control.

* Both cats and dogs are creatures of routine. Although your life will be turned upside down once the newborn arrives, try to stick to the animal's schedule of meals and walks. If you can't, don't be surprised if he "acts up." But don't mistake this response to your neglect as jealousy; animals do not feel spite, but if they sense a waning of your attention, they're likely to become extra demanding. To help you out, perhaps a neighbor's child would enjoy coming by every few days to take him for that coveted run in the park.

* As often as possible, include your pet in activities with the baby; ostracizing him can create more problems than it averts. Nursing, in particular, is an activity that both dogs and cats may enjoy watching. A dog may recognize the ritual as maternal and come to regard the infant as a littermate rather than a rival, according to Bashkim Dibra, author of Teach Your Dog To Behave. Letting a curious cat near will also have a positive effect, says Wilbourn: "Cats tend to be drawn to quiet, low-energy activities, so if he wants to curl up beside you while you nurse, let him."

FOR CATS ONLY

* Cats, in their own way, are just as territorial as dogs. Furthermore, they like to be in control of their surroundings; simply moving a favorite chair may send them into a tailspin. If the new crib is being delivered, and he comes out to inspect it, talk to him in reassuring tones, using his name, suggests Wilbourn. This will reduce his anxiety.

If the cat goes into hiding upon the infant's homecoming, let him be. When he does appear, be warm and affectionate, using the cat's name often. Indoor cats are more likely to be perturbed than those who can escape to the outdoors.

* Do not have your cat declawed. "By adding yet more trauma, you make him more susceptible to stress-induced illness," Wilbourn says. And, she adds, many people don't realize that a cat deprived of claws becomes more defensive and often turns into a biter.

* If you own one cat and have been thinking of getting another, an ideal time to do so is a few

months before the baby's birth. If the new cat is a good match, its companionship will help compensate for your diverted affections.

* If your cat "misbehaves" by eliminating outside his litter box or even "marking" baby's things, do not punish him. This gesture is an expression of anxiety, not spite. If you've ruled out any illness, all he may need from you is extra attention, reassurance, and patience as he adjusts to what he probably views as a very alarming state of affairs.

* Unless your cat is a refugee from a safari park, resist the temptation to lock him out of the newborn's room. If you're nervous about free access, put up a screen door, so that he can see what's going on in there even when he can't enter. The crib itself, however, should be a cat-free zone for sanitary and safety reasons, cautions Peter Kross, D.V.M., a New York City veterinarian. Fit the crib with a tent-shaped safety net that can be zipped open and shut; these are available at baby-supply stores.

FOR DOGS ONLY

As early as possible during your pregnancy, introduce your dog to babies while you're out on walks, before inviting one onto his home turf. Most dogs will be friendly and curious.

Some dogs will show fear; with these timid souls, you'll have to work more gradually to desensitize them. If patient reassurances don't lessen the fear, ask your vet to refer you to a reputable animal trainer or behaviorist, who may help you out in just one or two sessions.

You must seek help if your dog shows signs of aggressive hostility. If the aggression is minimal, an animal behaviorist may be able to help recondition the dog, but don't ignore signs of potential trouble. In some instances, you'd be better off finding your pet a new home.

* Watch out, too, for signs of possessiveness, a quality that, curiously, grows more obnoxious in some dogs during an owner's pregnancy. If the dog growls when you approach his food, or resists letting you take an object from his mouth, consult an animal behaviorist. This conduct is often correctable with a few simple exercises, but if you allow it to persist, you'll soon have a dog who's a potential menace around small children. "You should be able to take anything -- food or toys -- away from your dog without resistance and should practice doing so," says Dr. Borchelt. Otherwise, a crawling baby who tries to share a plaything with a possessive dog may be seriously harmed.

* If your dog is simply unruly or mischievous,

that long-postponed obedience class may be just as vital for him as a Lamaze class is for you. Most dogs regard their human family as a pack, with a strict hierarchy of power. If you're not the boss, he might decide he is. An undisciplined dog with such dominant tendencies can cause problems when a newborn joins the family. Liz Gordon, owner of Citydog Obedience School in New York City, advises choosing a class that dogs attend with owners, one in which you'll both learn basic skills and commands.

* When you bring the infant home from the hospital, have your husband hold the baby while you say hello to the dog alone, then introduce the baby. Depending on the dog, you may wish to have your husband hold him on a leash while your pet gets a closer look at the newborn. Praise and reassure him constantly if his reactions are enthusiastic and friendly - as they're likely to be.

* If your dog urine-marks the baby's things, it's nothing more than a territorial gesture, not an expression of resentment. You need to reassure the dog he's still loved.

* Most important, welcome the dog into everyday interactions with the infant. The first few times the dog watches you change the infant, you might let him smell a diaper before you dispose of it, says Dibra. This helps him identify with the baby, understanding that infants, too, "mark" their territory. Not only will a dog be confused and upset if you shut him out of "pack" activities, says Dibra, but he may become aggressively curious about the elusive baby herself.

Even in the most harmonious of circumstances, however, never leave any dog alone with an infant or small child. A trusted dog makes an excellent childhood companion but should never stand in for a sitter.

Julia Glass has lived with cats, parrots, rabbits, foxhounds, and horses.