If you have a dog or a cat who is currently your “baby” but you are now expecting a human baby, it’s important to prepare your furry kids for what is about to happen in their lives. A new baby in the house changes so many things for your pets - from walking schedules to sleeping arrangements. You really do need to prepare them for what’s to come. The best thing to do is to start preparing your pets a few months before the little bundle of joy comes into the scene. It might take them that long to get accustomed to all the sights, sounds and smells that will be new in the house. Fortunately, most dogs look upon a baby with curiosity and interest and will show no signs of aggression or other negative behavior. However, some dogs may perceive an infant as a strange mammal or even a potential item of prey. Dogs that have never seen a baby may not view them as human beings. To help prevent accidents, even with a normal, non-aggressive family dog, some basic precautions should be taken.

SIghts, Smells, and Sounds

The first thing to consider are all the smells that come with a baby because for dogs and cats, their sense of smell is their most important and powerful sense. To accustom your pets to baby smells, purchase some of the products that you will need for your baby (lotion, powder, baby oil, baby wipes) and start to use them on yourselves so that your pet becomes familiar with the new scents. You should also consider all of the sounds that come with a baby – the crying, screaming, gurgling, and laughter of a baby. You can find recordings online. Playing them will accustom your pets to the baby sounds they will experience. Bring in some of the new items that will be added to the house for the baby. Set up the nursery complete with a crib, changing table, playpen, and rocking chair so they get used to seeing these new pieces of furniture. If you are going to banish your pets from the nursery once the baby is here, let them investigate the items for a few days and then put up a baby gate on the door to the nursery so they learn ahead of time that this is an off-limit area.

The most valuable item you should purchase is a baby doll. Find a life-size baby doll and start to carry it around, sit with it in your lap, change its diaper, give it a bath, and put the lotion and powder on it. Basically, you want to act like this is your new baby so that your pet gets used to seeing you interact with something the way you will interact with your baby. This part might seem a bit creepy to you, but it is probably the most valuable thing you can do to prepare your pets for their new human sister or brother. The better you prepare your pets for the major change in all of your lives, the better they will accept this new little human.

Bringing Baby Home

Once you have done all of these things, the only new item in the house will be the actual living, breathing infant. When you bring the baby home from the hospital, have mom go into the house first to greet the pets who will be excited to see her after a few days' absence. Dad can carry the new baby inside behind mom. Your pets will be interested in smelling the baby, which you can let them do safely. If your dog tends to get overly excited in greeting or is a jumper, make sure he is on a tether so that he doesn’t jump up on the baby.

Be very careful not to punish your pets for being interested in the baby. If your dog jumps up to see the infant and you yell at him for jumping, you will have just formed a negative association – baby on scene means getting yelled at. That’s why it’s so important to control the dog with a leash or tether at first. The pets should be praised and even given a special treat when they first meet the baby so that a positive association is formed. With all of this great preparation, both you and your pets will be in good shape to welcome the newest member of your family into your home.

When can I allow my dog the freedom of the house?

The first step is to allow the dog to wander freely while you are holding the baby. The dog should not, however, ever have access to the baby in any unsupervised situation. A baby gate should be put on the entrance to the baby's room or the dog should be confined to areas of the house where it does not have access to the baby in the absence of the owners. The dog should be allowed as much freedom in the house and interaction with the adults as possible. Initially, when the parents prepare to play with the baby in the dog's presence, they should also interact with the dog in some manner. They might say, "Let's go see the baby," or ask the dog to sit and pet it or give it a reward. Again, food rewards are not necessary every time the owner asks the dog to sit or stay but occasional food rewards will help keep its interest and obedience levels high.

No one knows when a dog understands that an infant is a person. Most dogs adjust to the infant within a few days, while others may take several weeks. After the dog becomes used to the child's sounds and movements (it begins to pay little attention to these activities and is not excited or nervous when they occur), the parents can begin to relax their vigilance in the presence of the baby. This depends on the dog's history of aggression, especially predatory or hunting behavior. It is less likely that an unfortunate incident will occur if the dog is non-aggressive, relaxed and relatively uninterested in the baby under supervised circumstances. If you are concerned, you may keep baby gates on the baby's bedroom door or put up additional gates throughout the house to prevent access to the child.

The general rule is never to leave a child, especially one under three years of age, alone with any dog at any time. Obviously, only the family can make the decision if and when to leave an older child and dog alone and under what circumstances. Exercise caution and always err on the side of safety. Most incidents of dogs injuring babies occur within the first few hours or days of the infant's presence in the home or when a dog unexpectedly comes upon a new baby or child in an unsupervised situation. It is believed that predatory or hunting behavior is the motivation for the majority of attacks on infants.Other times a dog will bite a child due to the child taking or playing with favored objects, interference with food or feeding, or if the child startles or inadvertently hurts the dog during play.

To get used to the infant, the dog must be gradually exposed to the infant over time. There is simply no safe way to rush this process. Initial contacts must be supervised and made enjoyable or rewarding for the dog so it does not associate negative events with the baby. With close supervision and patience, most pets bond with the infant in a special way that benefits them both. There is nothing more rewarding than watching your two- and four-legged family members playing and growing together!