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Most dogs are compliant, but some need help accepting the new addition to the family.

We're familiar with images of Lassie: patient guardian, frolicking playmate and ardent protector of young master Timmy. The stuff of Hollywood legends, right? Maybe, but our vision of the perfect family often includes a loyal dog keeping a watchful eye over the children. However, adding a baby to the family can be trying time for the dog, especially if the dog has been the 'only child'.

Most dogs do come to view the baby as an integral part of the family, even if they may not step fully into the Lassie role. Sadly, though, some dogs become fearful or resentful of the baby and this can lead to family discord –and sometimes even disaster.

Unlikely Lassies

Expectant parents need to objectively evaluate how their dog will deal with the new family addition. There are a number of factors that contribute to disharmony between dogs and children. Dogs that behave badly toward children often do so because they have not been well socialized with children and find them unfamiliar and frightening. Children move quickly and unpredictably, they have loud, shrill voices, and their faces may be intimidating because they are at "dog level."

Dogs that are possessive about their food, bones or toys, and guard them from people should not be around children until this issue has been resolved because children are more likely than adults to reach for something the dog perceives as his own. A dog that is normally friendly to children can still behave aggressively if the child is in the vicinity of a valued object.

Some dogs appear to respond to babies like squeaky toys. The dog may be fine around the baby until it cries and wriggles, at which point the dog picks up the infant and shakes it, sometimes causing serious or even fatal injuries. While there are many dogs that shake their toys violently during play but would never display this same behaviour toward a baby, I'd be concerned about a dog that becomes extremely aroused and excited by a baby's cry.

Elderly or irritable dogs may not tolerate a child because of the erratic and potentially painful ways the child interacts with the dog. A dog that reacts by snapping when touched on certain areas of its body, because of chronic pain, is not a good candidate for living with a young child. Dogs with sensory deficits, such as deafness or blindness, can also have trouble adjusting to life with a child because of the unpredictability and chaos that children bring.

Take time to prepare

Expectant parents are wise to prepare the dog for the baby well in advance. Dogs become accustomed to routine and can be stressed when an establish pattern is suddenly interrupted. If walks or training activities are going to be rescheduled or cut back, introduce the changes gradually. If some of the dog's privileges, such as getting on the bed or sitting on the owner's lap, will be curtailed, introduce those restrictions now so the dog has plenty of time to adjust. Does it help to practice with a lifelike doll? A doll can help parents to simulate new activities like; feeding, carrying, rocking, etc. If possible, use clothes and blankets that smell of a young baby to get the dog used to novel odours. If the dog is inclined to jump when you lift the doll up into your arms be sure to teach the dog to Sit or Down whenever you are handling the doll. Praise the dog for gentle contact with the doll.

Dogs sensitive about noises can get agitated or frightened when a baby cries. It can help to play an audiotape of realistic baby noise frequently, while giving the dog plenty of attention, play or treats. If the dog is really afraid of the taped noise, you might need to start with the volume very low and increase it gradually as the dog learns to enjoy the experience.

Excellent verbal control of the dog is desirable when it comes to juggling the requirements of the dog and the baby, so the pregnancy months are good time to hone the dog's obedience skills. Certain behaviours are particularly useful, such as Sit, Down, Stay, Wait, Leave it, Come, Go, Get back, Take it and Leave it.

The first meeting

Introducing the dog to the new baby can be stressful for everyone involved. It is very important to stay calm. If the parents act nervous and jumpy, the dog may become nervous as well.

If possible, come in and greet the dog, make the dog the center of attention for a few moments. Once the dog is calm, bring the baby in. Encourage the dog to approach and sniff the baby. Distract the dog with plenty of treats so his attention is divided between the baby, the adults and the food. Intersperse with obedience exercises to keep the dog's behaviour under control. Praise the dog for calm interest in the baby. You want to ensure that the dog has pleasant associations with the baby.

If the parents suspect that the dog might behave badly, he should wear a muzzle or head halter and leash for control. He should be accustomed to this equipment before the introduction. A muzzle allows everyone to feel more relaxed and the dog can be permitted freedom of movement so he won't feel trapped in a scary situation. Begin the introduction with the dog a few feet away from the baby. Have the dog lie down and offer him treats or whatever he enjoys that is consistent with being relaxed. Talk to the dog while gradually moving closer. When you get sufficiently close, carefully allow the dog to sniff at the baby and praise the dog's gentle contact. If the dog gets agitated, end the session. Give the dog time to calm down, maybe go for a walk, and then conduct another short meeting.

Daily life with baby

As hard as it may be to implement, the strategy that works best is to pay plenty of attention to the dog when the baby is awake and to ignore him when the baby is sleeping or absent. When the baby is around, good things, such as stroking cuddling, playing, eating treats, etc., happen for the dog. When the baby is not present, interactions with the dog are minimum. For instance, you can have the baby in your lap while you talk and stroke the dog, give treats or play fetch. Or you can give the dog a chew bone while you attend to the baby. When you feed the baby, feed the dog as well. When you walk the dog, take the baby along in a pram or baby backpack.

Before the baby is able to interact with the dog, prepare the dog for what the baby might do, such as grabbing, poking and pulling. Even though you will teach the baby to handle the dog gently, you must also teach the dog to enjoy 'baby moves' by teaching him that good things follow being poked and grabbed. For instance, pull the dog's ear, say "Oh, what was that?" and give him a treat. Then, when the baby pinches the dog's tail, you can say, "Oh, what was that?" and the dog will expect to get a treat!

You can also get your dog used to a person crawling on the floor before the baby becomes mobile. Dogs that have only lived with adults have probably never seen people crawl, so it can be an intimidating experience. Crawl toward him and give him cuddles and treats. Once he is comfortable with this new game and anticipates the treats, incorporate the baby into the picture. Place the baby on your back, support by your partner, when you crawl. This will prepare the dog for the day the baby comes zooming in at him!

If your dog seems nervous of the baby, teach the dog to "go away" *before* the baby starts crawling. I teach my dog to move in the direction I gesture with my hand. You can move him from a distance, if you see the baby crawling toward the dog or if you see the dog looking uncomfortable in an interaction with the baby. Some parents regularly remove the child when the dog gets uncomfortable and this perpetuates the dog's behaviour: when he growls or snaps, the child is removed and this reinforces the aggressive behaviour. Sometimes the dog just needs to learn that moving away is an option – if the dog feels uncomfortable about being close to the child, he can relocate somewhere else. Of course, until the dog is reliable about "go away," in the interest of safety, remove the child!

Pay attention to the layout of the home. Some dogs are fine with the baby unless they feel trapped and vulnerable. Minimize the amount of furniture in the rooms or pull furniture away from the walls and corners to allow for escape routes. Teach the dog to jump over the backs or sides of chairs and sofas so he won't get trapped, should the baby pull up onto the furniture. Once the baby starts moving around, establish a safe zone for the dog. This zone should be up high where the baby can't reach him and in the room where the dog spends most of his time. Use a phrase, such as "go to your spot," so the dogs can be encouraged to go there when activities get hectic.