Introducing a New Baby to your Dog

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| Successfully introducing a new baby to the resident dog needs to be well planned and well thought through.  Here are some points to ensure a happy and harmonious family life for all its members.  Before the baby’s birthIf there are to be any new rules applied to the dog because of the new addition to your pack, ensure that the dog is living by them well before the baby’s arrival on the scene.  Many people decide that the dog will no longer be allowed in the house at all, or perhaps now confined to certain rooms.  You may wish to feed the dog in a different location, to increase hygiene levels.  Similarly, the dog’s sleeping place might need to be changed and dog toys may now have to live outside.  Try to anticipate any required changes and implement them as soon as possible – we do not want the dog to associate the new arrival with unwanted changes in his/her life!  If your dog has been sleeping in your bedroom, it is imperative that he/she be relocated immediately.  Your dog must sleep in a confined area such as the laundry, bathroom, garage or backyard.  Allowing the dog to sleep closest to you will elevate his/her rank and importance above that of the new baby.  Ensure the new sleeping arrangements have been established well before bringing your baby home.  Bringing the new baby home  A baby wrapped up in blankets and shawls can be a confusing thing to a dog.  The noises of a baby can sound like the mews of a baby animal and may stimulate the dog’s prey-drive instinct.  I personally believe that the baby should be partially unwrapped and the dog allowed a controlled investigation of it.  Do not follow this procedure unless you have confidence in your dog and can remain calm and almost off-hand.  If the dog senses your anxiety, he/she may connect this with the baby and a negative association will become established.  Having done the right thing before bringing the baby home and not trying to introduce radical changes after the baby’s arrival, life will progress pretty much as usual for your dog.  Until, that is, the baby starts becoming mobile!  Your dog can get away with ignoring the new arrival while the baby is stationary.  Instead, use this time more productively, to build a good association in the dog’s mind towards your little one.  Whenever you are doing something with the baby such as feed, bathing, nappy changing, cuddling, etc., have some tasty tidbits at hand for the dog.  Toss the dog a tidbit every 20 to 30 seconds to begin with, gradually lengthening the pauses between rewards.  The dog will come to associate your being involved with the baby as very rewarding.  Tiny fingers will manage to poke eyes, pull ears and get caught up in longish fur coats during discovery tours.  Try to protect your dog from the worst of these whilst also preparing him/her for these atrocities.  When the baby is not with you, entangle your own fingers in your dog’s coat, causing a gentle tug, reward his tolerance with immense praise, petting and tidbits.  Gradually increase the severity of the tug and turn it into a game so that the dog comes to see the tugging of his coat as a loving gesture on your part.  Try the same technique with ears, tail, etc.  Have your dog become conditioned to your weight against him, gently at first, then work up to suddenly putting pressure on him.  Once again, you will have prepared the dog for minor accidents by your child.  Hopefully, when these unexpected incidents happen, the dog will not feel quite so panicked and perhaps a nip can be avoided.  Most of us would like to be able to feel confident that if our youngster happened to accidentally approach the dog while it was eating, the dog would tolerate the situation without displaying any form of aggression.  We need to understand the dog’s natural instincts and behaviour in regards to food.  In canine law, possession is nine tenths of the law.  Any member of the pack is entitled to guard food in his/her possession against any other member of the pack, despite the rank of each individual involved.  This is why a dog is highly unlikely to growl at you while your are standing up with the food bowl, but the moment you place it on the ground, he/she will consider it in their possession and feel entitled to guard it from you.  Should you reach out to take the food bowl whilst the dog is guarding it, you will risk being bitten.  However, once you have possession of the bowl again, the dog will behave in what appears to us as an apologetic manner.  Having ignored the dog’s attempts to warn you off, next time you attempt to steal the food, he/she may feel a need to escalate the warning!  Instead, let’s use our understanding of the dog to alter the idea in his/her mind as to what our approach to the food signifies.  Do not teach the dog that you are a threat to the food by attempting to take it when he/she tries to warn you away – head the warning and do not approach any closer.  This way, your dog can feel comfortable that he/she does not have to escalate the warning.  Place only half of the dog’s meal in the bowl, reserving the yummiest bits, steak fat, leftover, etc.  Place the dog’s bowl on the ground in the usual manner and move away.  Return to the dog with more food in your hand before he/she has finished the food in the bowl.  Stop the moment you detect any warning such as tensing up or aggressive displays, toss the food in to the bowl.  Repeat the sequence.  It will depend on the dog’s past experiences as to how long it will take you to be able to approach it at the food without him/her feeling concerned at all.   We want to achieve the ultimate result of being able to pat the dog and even move his food bowl, without him becoming concerned.   (Start by always giving him further yummies after each occasion he has tolerated your patting or touching the bowl).  Of course, this type of training needs to be carried out by an adult.  Only when the dog is absolutely reliable, would you consider introducing a child to the scenario.  You might also consider increasing the number of meals presented to the dog each day, so that the dog will see the food as a less valuable resource requiring less protection.  It is always helpful to have the child give the dog his meal each day, to help establish a better association in the dog’s mind towards the child.  Your new baby could be included in all activities that the dog finds pleasant, to start building on a great association from day one.  Keep in mind that most dog bites occur in children in the age group 0 to 5 years.  Often the dog believes it has a right to discipline the child; perhaps the dog simply does not have sufficient respect or confidence in the pack hierarchy.  Review your role as pack leader, to ensure you’re leaving no doubt in the dog’s mind as to the capability and reliability of the pack structure.  Never be so foolish as to believe that your dog may feel threatened in a particular situation and acts defensively, many dogs will react defensively when suddenly woken, or something may have seriously startled the dog.  **PLAY SAFE – ALWAYS FULLY SUPERVISE CHILDREN AND DOGS DURING ANY INTERACTION**  As your child’s understanding increases with age, make an ongoing commitment to educate them in the handling of their pets and also the handling of other people’s animals.  In particular, approaching dogs that are tied up: a dog can be at his most defensive in this situation.  Always check with the owner and supervise the situation.  Try to encourage the child to stroke the side of the dog’s face, rather than reaching over the top of its head.  A nervous child may at confidence in stroking the dog’s back while the owner holds the dog’s head.  Placing the dog into the DOWN STAY position may also help in this respect.  Whilst we demand the dog’s respect, ensure that the child learns to respect the dog!  Finally, no child deserves to be bitten.  If you dog is behaving aggressively towards your child, is it worth putting the child at risk while attempting to work at the dog’s problem?  In my mind the answer has to be no. |