Pets and kids

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Old pet, new kid
One of the most common situations that pet owners have questions about is how to introduce a new baby to their pets and how to get the pet ready for the baby. This is definitely a situation where the sooner the better applies. Practices should encourage clients to start thinking about pet-child interactions well in advance of a pregnancy/adoption. Have client education materials available, even if it’s just a sign or note on the invoice reminding clients to ask you if they have any questions about this topic.

Old dog, new kid
There’s a lot of good advice available online from websites like www.aspca.org, positively.com, or bestfriends.org. The books, “Tell Your Dog You’re Pregnant” and “Tell Your Cat You’re Pregnant” are also good resources.

My personal experiences led me to change my approach to this situation a bit. Like many others, I used to emphasize things like limiting the amount of attention the dog got when the baby is sleeping and making fun things happen when the baby is awake. Sounds great, until you’re an exhausted new parent with a fussy newborn and a couple of high energy terriers! This sort of advice was just another source of guilt and self-doubt, only the guilt was geared towards the neglected dogs rather than the poor baby with the incompetent parent.

Now I recommend putting a lot of time in, well before the birth of the baby, on teaching the dog to be comfortable being physically separated from people when the people are home. This can be done using a baby gate, exercise pen or crate. When the baby is up and about, especially as the child gains mobility, the dog can be comfortably separated and given a long-lasting goodie or a food dispensing toy. Meanwhile, harried new parents don’t have to feel guilty or risk an accident by trying to pet or play with the dog while nursing the baby or changing themselves and their child out of the fourth outfit that has fallen prey to spit up that day.

Old cat, new kid
Again, lots of good advice that’s fairly readily available. For most cats the best piece of advice is to make changes as far ahead of time as possible. This will allow the cats to adjust to the changes and owners to make and tweaks to make their plans better fit the cat’s agenda. For nursery doorways, I like having owners install a screen door. This allows for air circulation and they can hear the baby even if they forget to turn on the baby monitor but keeps the cat out.

If owners already know that the cat is afraid of visitors and/or sensitive to sounds, it may be helpful to start the cat on a medication before the baby arrives. In planning for a new baby, pet owners may not think of all the adult visitors will likely be coming over to see the baby for some cats, this can be worse than the infant. If the cat is generally anxious, I’d be likely to try either fluoxetine or clomipramine. If the cat is probably going to be ok with the baby but scared of all the visitors, a medication that can be used PRN, such as alprazolam or trazodone or gabapentin is a good choice.
Old pet, older kid
Pets and kids aren't always the best combination. Young children are not good at interpreting dog body language, especially fearful behaviours.\(^1\) This can be true even when the children have lived with dogs. As children become more mobile and independent, parents may need to increase the practice of “supervise or separate”. The child’s behaviour also becomes more of a factor because children will have varying levels of interest in interacting with the pets in a home base on many factors including the child’s age and personality.

Many parents who have very tolerant dogs do not teach their children how to appropriately interact with dogs in general. I have seen many patients who bit a visiting child who “lives with a dog that lets the kid do anything”. Even if your clients have a perfect dog, you should take the time to talk to them about teaching their children how to behave with other dogs.

As children get older they can become more involved in the lives of the family’s pets. To let small children who are not yet speaking clearly get involved in dog training teach the dog to recognize a couple of hand signals. The adult can then stand behind the child. While the child gives a verbal (but probably unintelligible to everyone but the parent) command, the adult can give the corresponding hand signal. When the dog follows the command, the child can give the reward.

New pet, old kids
No matter what they tell you, you’re going to be the one taking care of the pets, not the kids (wait, that’s human behaviour, not animal behaviour) - that’s my current number one lesson.

References