

Babies and Beasts - Working with the beasts after the baby arrives

By Jennifer Lee

Preface

Over the next few months:

- You will want to kill your dog for eating the dirty baby diaper, chewing up the third pair of shoes, destroying the baby's toys, etc. It's perfectly normal.
- You will feel guilty and think maybe for even a split second that rehoming your pet is better for them. It's a normal emotion to have and one you will get over once you get some sleep (which may be months off, so just hold tight).
- You will face some challenges getting the baby and pets to get along perfectly. Remember you have two beings who don't speak English, so you are their only buffer and translator. Sometimes signals will get crossed and it's okay. Accidents happen and you live, you learn and you move on. To be even more specific, if your dog growls or snaps at the baby (most likely when newly mobile, which is what happened in our house) it's up to YOU and you alone to be a better monitor of their interactions. Get mad, then get logical and note that you are the common denominator.
- You will get too lax and too comfortable with the status quo. Be sure to be consistent in your interactions and monitoring of the pets and baby, which is easier said than done. Protect your pet from the baby's poking and prodding, and protect the baby from the dog's tendencies to want to treat/correct the baby as if it were a puppy (which means using its mouth). I highly recommend "Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide," by Brenda Aloff as a source for how to better interpret when your dog is telling you he's tense. For example, sometimes what looks like a happy tail held high is really a sign of distress.

Dogs have a hard time adjusting to newborns with all their funky smells and screaming voices. What no one ever tells you however is getting your dog adjusted to your infant is just the first hurdle.

So, what's the second hurdle you might ask? It's the newly mobile baby crawling, rolling, pulling themselves up, all weebly wobbly. Let's face it - a moving baby on all fours looks a lot like a puppy in the eyes of your dog. And what do dogs do to puppies that are annoying them or coming at them too often? They correct them with their open mouths. No, we are not talking bites. A growl and a snap and an unprovoked bite requiring medical attention are two vastly different things. Are either acceptable? No, so let's address some ways to combat this issue.

Get to know some dog body language. Your dog will have some unique ways of telling you he/she is in distress. Some of these might include licking their lips, avoiding eye contact, a change in how their whiskers lie - subtle little ways dogs communicate with one another about their level of discomfort. Since they cannot shout out "get this freaky looking puppy away from me!" it's up to you to closely monitor all baby/dog interactions so you know when it's time to say enough is enough. This means you cannot leave the baby on the living room floor with the dog and walk over to the kitchen to put up a dirty cup, not even just once.

Think about creating pet-free and baby-free zones in your house with the use of baby gates. This way your pets can observe your little human from a safe space, and your baby is free to explore their surroundings without any pet getting in their way. If you don't have ample space to do so, then consider putting your pet away in a crate or in a bedroom occasionally for some quiet time. I know it sounds like punishment, but you can take a special toy or treat and instead turn the experience into a reward. I found that peanut butter Kongs, Buster Cubes, or other treat balls work great for my dogs.

lizzi & rocco's

natural pet market

503 e. nifong blvd, suite j | columbia, mo 65201
573-875-2288 | lizziandroccos.com



If you closely observe your dogs you will begin to see them pleading for peace and quiet. Trust me, they will thank you for bailing them out. But, this phase is only temporary, and soon you will have an insane toddler who will hold their own and your doggie will learn the small human can (and will) throw food at them. Score!

Other measures to remind your dog that you are in charge and only you will be correcting the baby is to use the NILIF (nothing in life is free) method. This basically means for every reward your dog is to receive (food, affection, a walk, etc.), they are to perform some of their commands to help them maintain their manners. For some stubborn dogs, it can also mean no sleeping or sitting where the humans do.

For example, my dogs have to sit quietly for their food and not rush me the second their food bowl hits the floor. They sit for a variety of times - maybe 10 seconds one night and 1 minute the next. If they don't get it right, the food bowl goes back up and we try again. Other ways to implement NILIF is to have the dog always allow you (and baby) to enter through doors first, to follow you down a set of stairs versus charging ahead, and to walk loosely on the leash behind the stroller. Think of them as mini training sessions and for every action there is a small reward - be it verbal praise, a good butt scratch, a treat or dinner.

You might want to know how I came to know all of this, as this kind of stuff isn't normally brought up at dinner parties or family gatherings. My dog snapped at my son when he was newly crawling. I was literally right there when it happened. I freaked. Some background on my dog and why this was so shocking - he is quite simply the goofiest dog you could ever meet. Totally happy-go-lucky, loves my son to pieces, follows me like a shadow from room to room, has never met a stranger he didn't like, all around a really likable fellow with no issues. So who was this dog who snapped at my baby and left a small mark on his cheek?

It took about 24 hours for me to calm down and see things from a less emotional place. We made an appointment with our trainer and I thought long and hard about what I had done to set them both up for this incident. It boiled down to too much togetherness. My son had crawled near a pair of shoes I wore all the time to the animal shelter. My dog, for some reason, didn't think this was appropriate, so he placed his mouth on my son. He never applied pressure, but in my scooping up of my son, I most likely scraped/bumped his cheek against one of my dog's incisors which resulted in a small red spot.

Twenty-four hours later it was gone and we implemented all of the measure above. That was over a three years ago and we have all moved on and learned from the experience. My dog and my son continue to be the best of friends and are most often found playing ball with one another, if not sharing snacks.

No matter how many times Fido has allowed the baby to tug on his fur and pull his ears, he is a living creature capable of being annoyed and he may eventually reach the end of his patience. This is where you step in to prevent anything from happening by allowing the dog to have his own space if and when he needs it.

As a note: if your dog happens to lash out at your child seemingly unprovoked, it would be a good idea to get him into the vet for a check-up. Dogs can also bite as a sign that they are in some pretty extreme pain, so ruling out any medical reasons for a growling/snapping/biting incident is a smart move.

About the author: I'm Jennifer, mom to my preschooler, Becks, and slave to my two hairy beasts, Maximus and Bellona (who combined have 100 pounds on me). I work full-time, but try my hardest to support animal rescue when the opportunity arises. My goal in writing this is that no mom ever feels they need to dump their pet after the baby arrives. Hopefully my real life experiences will hold some value to you. My disclaimer is that I have no professional training or degrees related to animals or babies. I only have my personal experiences, a decent amount of common sense and a group of people involved with animals to bounce ideas off of.