

Babies and Beasts

By Jennifer Lee

If you think your first day home from the hospital is your first opportunity to prepare your beasts for baby, you are seven kinds of wrong. Sure, some might get lucky and have no issues at all, but most parents of babies and beasts have growing pains. It's normal, so don't let anyone convince you otherwise, especially while your hormones are off the charts wacky. Just so you know more about me, I am a planner by nature when it comes to overwhelming life changes. It's a coping mechanism for me. Here is my strategic plan to prepare the dogs for baby aka "Jennifer is so freaked out at becoming a parent and pushing a human out her hoo ha that she's going to focus on the things she can control".

My excessive methods for preparing dogs and cats for a baby

1. Find a really good trainer and behaviorist, if anything, just to keep on file in case you need more help. They will be invaluable to help troubleshoot and correct any bad behaviors that you don't know how to handle or interpret. You can find a certified behaviorist through <http://www.certifiedanimalbehaviorist.com/>
2. Read the following books: "There's a Baby in the House" and "Childproofing Your Dog".
3. Get the CD "Preparing Fido" (www.preparingfido.com) and start desensitizing your pets to the many sounds a baby makes. Start on a low volume, and work your way up. When the baby cries come on, tend to a baby doll or to a diaper-filled sling you are wearing so they can start making the association that you will make the bad sounds stop. It will make for a less anxious pet.
4. Line up a dog walker, even if you have never used one before. There will come a day when there are just not enough hours in it, and having someone available to help your dog burn off some energy when you're not able to will be invaluable.
5. Be sure to stock up on things like food and monthly preventatives since it will be near impossible to run those little errands. You are going to need every spare second and every drop of energy you can cling to some days.
6. If your dog needs frequent grooming, or even the occasional bath, find a mobile groomer to come to you. Some days it was all I could do to bathe myself, so you can imagine the dogs were missing out too. Also, by feeding higher quality foods, many dogs can go months without smelling doggy and needing a bath. Lower quality foods, on the other hand, are full of nasty stuff that will make your dog's coat gunk up and smell. See www.dogfoodanalysis.com and www.dogaware.com for more info.
7. Set up everything ahead of time, especially the nursery, cribs, swings, strollers, changing tables, etc. Everything will be new and interesting to your pets, so it's best to give them time to adjust to all the equipment by the time the baby arrives. This will also give it all time to lose its chemically new smell that always grosses me out.
8. Turn on everything that lights up, plays music or moves, and desensitize your pet to them. Let me tell you, it took weeks before my dog quit freaking out over the swing moving, lighting up and playing music. Use some clicker/reward training and reward and praise your pet for not attacking the swing, not barking, etc. Acknowledge the behaviors you want and ignore the ones you don't. Use some redirection if necessary. For example, when my dog would lunge and bark at the swing, I'd ask him to go get his ball. He is simple-minded like that.



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9. Use baby lotion, wipes and diaper cream on yourself before the baby arrives so the smells aren't foreign to them. Even wipe the pets down with them on occasion to get them used to the smells.

10. The minute you get a stroller, practice walking the dog with it. Trust me, it's tricky at first and the last thing you want is your dog knocking over the stroller with a baby in it. If your dog doesn't already have proper leash manners, make that a top priority. When you are cooped up on maternity leave and bored out of your mind, walking the dogs can be like a little slice of heaven.

11. If you plan on wearing a sling or Baby Bjorn around the house, stuff it full of diapers and practice wearing it while you are at home. The smell and sight might cause some jumping out of curiosity, so best to tackle that before you are lugging precious cargo. Lots of treats should be doled out when poochie has all fours on the floor.

12. Think about what commands your dog knows really well and which ones he/she should learn. Some of the most often used commands in my house are sit, down, gentle, go to your place, zip it, leave it and off. Practice them daily. Start using NILIF for those dogs that are currently the center of the universe and/or dominant/stubborn dogs. NILIF stands for "nothing in life is free" and is a great training technique that is easy to implement at home.

13. Create a baby-free zone for your pets and teach them to go to it. It could be a crate or a bed – just something that will give them a place to escape when they've had enough with the crying, poking and fur-pulling.

14. If your pet sleeps with you on the bed and you plan on co-sleeping (or you don't plan on it, but end up doing it just so you can get some sleep), he will need a new, yet familiar, place to sleep. Maybe train him to sleep in a bed on the floor. If he already sleeps on the floor, but in the only place the bassinet or co-sleeper will fit, move his bed now so he has time to adjust. Remember, dogs are pack animals and sleeping in the same bedroom as you and baby is a great way to reconnect and establish harmony in the house.

15. Quit adhering to any set schedule as the baby's due date approaches. That means no more dinner promptly at 5:30 - make meal times erratic. Cut back on any of your normal daily regimens (i.e. walks, trips to the dog park., etc.). Mix up their schedule, keep them guessing and try to not dote on them constantly.

This is crucial, so when the baby comes, your pets are already used to being lower on the priority list. It will lessen the effects of accidentally forgetting to feed them one night, they will not be so demanding of attention at inappropriate times and they will bask in the glow of any walks or belly rubs they get. It sounds mean, but it's in the best interest of everyone. Trust me, for as much as you are turning your pet's life upside down, it will in no way compare to the havoc the baby will have on your sense of normalcy!

Lastly, words cannot express the love I feel for my child and my dogs. He literally lights up at the sight of them, he loves to give them treats and he relishes in their kisses. **I do not doubt for a minute that they are making his heart infinitely larger, teaching him the credence of treating all living things with kindness and molding him into a remarkable person.** So it's not always flowers and rainbows, but what in life worth having ever is?

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.



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