

WHEN BABY MAKES FOUR:

Preparing Your Weimaraner For a New Addition to the Family

By Patty Cornelius

It never fails, each week we get at least one call into our rescue program from a tired, frantic new parent saying “Help! We have a new baby and we need to find a home for our Weimaraner!” New parents are often finding life with a weim and a baby difficult to handle. The problems they now face could have easily been avoided with some prior planning and a little bit of time and patience. There are thousands of dogs dumped in shelters each year because a new baby came along and life suddenly became too hectic for the family. Most of these dogs never make it to another home. In fact, owner released dogs often are given only 1-3 days to find a new home before they are euthanized.

If you are a new parent, or an expecting parent, you are not the first, and most definitely will not be the last person who will face the challenge of bringing a new baby into a house where the dog has been the only “child”. In today’s society where couples are waiting longer to have children, couples often bring a pet or pets in the household and these pets become “surrogate” children. The animals receive all of the attention that a child would normally receive. I personally think a dog is great practice for a child - but this practice is also causing too many dogs to be neglected and even abandoned as children start to enter the picture.

Remember, you are the one who chose to bring this dog into the family and his well-being is your responsibility for the rest of his life. It’s unreasonable to expect your loyal, loving pet to instantly accept a new baby into the household. It won’t happen overnight. You will need to begin to prepare your dog for this drastic change in the months before the baby is due.

BEFORE THE BABY IS BORN

Obedience Training It is important to practice obedience training, or in some cases, begin obedience training. Without this, it will be nearly impossible to maintain sanity in the house once the new one arrives.

Your dog has a natural desire to be a part of a pack. You need to evaluate your dog's position in your pack. Is he the alpha dog of the family? Does he boss you around? By this, I mean does he growl or snap at you when you try to get him off of the couch or take away his toy? Does he demand to be petted? Will he wait to start eating his food if you told him to? If your dog has taken over the house as the pack leader, it's never too late to reestablish control. A dog that controls the adults in the house will most definitely try to control the children in the house. The results of this could be disastrous. If you need help in reconfiguring the pack order in your house, please contact someone in our rescue organization or a dog trainer. It isn't hard to do, but you need guidance to make it happen safely and effectively.

You may need to reestablish your dog's boundaries in the house. This may be the time to kick Fido out of your bed and make him sleep on a dog bed. You will be too tired to deal with this after the baby comes. Think about the behaviors that need to be changed before the baby arrives and start working to correct them immediately.

Take time to practice and reinforce commands like "sit", "down", "stay", and "off". As always, make training a positive experience. Use only positive reinforcement such as treats or praise. NEVER use negative reinforcement like hitting or isolation when training a dog. This will only serve to make your dog fearful and untrusting - the opposite of what you want to gain from obedience training.

Begin to gradually reduce the amount of attention you give the dog. If Fido is used to being the center of attention in your household, he will expect this to be the same when the baby arrives. If he is suddenly not the center of attention, he will associate the baby with this lack of attention and he may develop a negative attitude about the baby.

If you have a dog that is very demanding, one who nudges, barks, or paws at you for attention, you need to eliminate this behavior before the baby comes. This kind of behavior could startle or even injure the baby. If he paws at you to pet him, ignore him for a few seconds. Make him sit. When he does, pet him. This will make him associate sitting next to you with being petted. Do not reinforce the negative behaviors of nudging, pawing, and barking by giving in. Ignore them, make the dog sit, then give him the attention he needs. The behaviors will eventually go away if you are consistent.

If you have a dog who is a “mouther” (one that likes to put your hands in his mouth), a dog who play-bites, or nips affectionately, this behavior will also need to be eliminated before the baby arrives. To eliminate this behavior, use a sharp “NO!” when it happens. Walk away and ignore the dog. Do not continue to play. He will associate biting with you ending the play session. If you are consistent, it will stop. If the “NO!” command is not enough, try a squirt bottle filled with water. Dogs hate to be squirted in the face with water.

Once you have your dog back under your control - a dog who responds to commands, doesn't exhibit dangerous behaviors, and realizes he's not the center of your world any longer - the initial introduction to the baby and the months following will be much easier to handle.

Preparing Your Dog For Life With A Baby

Next, you need to start familiarizing your dog with child-like behaviors. Try to expose your dog to as many babies and children as you can. This is called socialization. Start by letting your dog observe children at play and slowly move toward the children. Every time your dog does this without any negative behaviors, reward him with a special treat. If your dog growls, snaps, or acts frightened, leave quickly but calmly. Don't get upset and don't scold the dog. It's important to keep his stress level down during this training. Try again later but take it more slowly next time. Try using more frequent rewards for good behavior. Make him sit while watching the children play. Give him a tasty treat when he does. If he acts fine while walking towards the children, treat him then.

Begin to prepare your dog to be handled by a child. To do this, give him a special treat. While he is enjoying the treat, begin to poke, grab, and gently pinch his coat. Do this gently at first and then work up to a level of intensity that a child might exhibit. This training will be done only as a precautionary measure. You should train the child as he or she grows older not to poke, pinch, or hit the dog. In doing so, you are helping to prevent serious injury to your child. The dog will learn to respect the child if the child is taught to respect the dog.

Food safety is another area you need to focus on during this period of time. You need to get your dog used to having others near his food bowl while he is eating. While the dog is eating, drop in a special treat or two. Verbally praise him as he gobbles it up. Try to do this every time he eats. While he is eating, make some noise in the house, run, scream, do the things a baby or toddler would do so that the dog becomes accustomed to a little chaos during dinner time. Remember to praise him each time he exhibits the desired behavior. This is another practice that should be done only as a precautionary measure. It is important for you to train your child not to disturb the dog while he is eating. Do not allow the child to touch the dog or the food during dinnertime. Again, you are risking serious injury to your child if you allow this to happen. While you are preparing the nursery, don't shut the dog out. Let him in to become familiar with the new sights and smells. Let him sniff blankets, toys, and clothes. Make sure he is not trying to put any of these items in his mouth. You might need to take time to practice the "drop it" command if he tries to put the baby's things in his mouth. Remember, you won't have the time or the energy to do this after the baby is here.

This time before the birth of the baby is a good time to teach your dog how to heel beside you while you push a stroller. It will not be safe for the baby or the dog to try to teach this when the baby is in the stroller. Daily walks are a great way to spend quality time with the dog and the baby together. This will also help promote the bond between the dog and the baby. Your Weimaraner's exercise requirements will not change with the arrival of the baby. In fact, with all of that nervous energy, he may need more exercise than before. Try to plan time for his exercise needs. We always say in rescue "A tired dog is a good dog!"

ONCE THE BABY ARRIVES HOME

After the baby is born, before he or she comes home, the father should bring home something that has the baby's scent on it. This might be a blanket or a nightgown. Allow the dog to sniff and become familiar with the baby's smell. Praise and reward him for sniffing gently. Do not get him over excited by the praise.

Upon entry to the house, let the father or another person carry the baby into the house. The mother should greet the dog the way she normally does. Immediately give him a very special toy or treat. This will help distract his attention away from the baby. This also makes the entry of the baby a positive start for the dog.

During this initial entry, it's best to have the dog on a leash. This way you will have quick control over him if something unexpected happens. Let him sniff around for a minute as the baby comes in the door. Eventually, the mom should sit on the couch with the baby. Before she sits, she should give the "sit" and "stay" command. The father, or someone else, should have hold of the leash. After the dog sits, the mom should sit with the baby and allow the dog to say hello. Praise him as he gently says hello to the baby. If the dog does something inappropriate at this time, calmly and without emotion, remove the dog from the situation and try again later. You should NEVER leave the dog and baby alone for any amount of time no matter how trustworthy you feel the dog may be. It only takes a split second for an accident to happen. Many families make the mistake of isolating the dog from the baby. This only creates anxiety in the dog and makes him more likely to get over excited or upset about the baby. Make sure the dog is included in this initial arrival and in all aspects of the routines with the baby. Let him sit by you as you feed or bathe the baby. Keep him included in the daily household routines just as he is used to. Do not banish your pet to a life in the backyard. This will only make matters worse and it's not fair to your pet.

AS YOUR CHILD GROWS OLDER

Training your child how to treat the family pet is just as important as training your family pet how to treat the child. Most dog bites happen when children are

not treating the dog respectfully. How long would you put up with someone poking you with a stick, throwing blocks at you, or trying to stuff raisins in your ears? Dogs get irritated by annoying behavior just like we humans do.

Children are not born knowing how to interact with pets. You will have to teach the child the proper way to touch the dog. Start with a gentle touch on the back. Encourage them to keep their hands away from the dog's face. Let them know that it is never okay to sneak up on the dog.

Also, as stated before, teach the child to stay away from the dog while he is eating or while he's enjoying a treat or a toy. Tell them to NEVER try to take food or toys away from the dog.

Do not allow your child to play tug-of-war or wrestling games with the dog. This is the behavior that puppies exhibit within their pack when they are trying to establish the pack order I mentioned previously. When the dog beats the child at these games, he sees it as dominating the weaker member of the pack and this will lead to more problems down the road. Teach your child how to play games like fetch and hide and seek instead.

Teaching children to live with pets is an on-going process. Some parents put the entire responsibility of care for the dog in the hands of the children. While it is important for the children to learn to share the responsibilities of the family pet, it is not reasonable to expect the child to be the sole care taker. It wouldn't be fair for the dog to miss dinner for the night because Susie forgot to feed him. It's also not fair that the dog has to do his business on the living room rug because someone forgot to take him out. Any parent who says they are getting a dog "for the kids" is only fooling themselves. Once the "honeymoon" period wears off, the children aren't as eager to feed, walk, and play with the dog.

CONCLUSION

As you probably already know, dogs can bring an immense amount love and happiness to your home. The arrival of a baby does not have to change any of this. With a commitment of time and patience from you, your child can grow up

knowing the joys of living with a dog. Part of our rescue mission is to help counsel and educate Weimaraner owners with problems they may encounter. We are here to answer your questions and provide information to you at no cost. If you need to contact us about the issue of a new baby or any other problems you may be experiencing with your Weimaraner, please feel free to email us at bark@weimrescuetexas.org or call our voice mail number at (972) 994-3572.

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