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Preparing your pet for the arrival of a new baby

BEFORE your baby arrives

1. Make sure your pet is healthy: vaccinated, spayed or neutered, nails clipped, rid of fleas (no collars)
2. Work to correct existing behavior problems:
   Dogs: jumping, pulling, mouthiness, barking, getting on furniture, possessiveness
   Cats: play aggression, inappropriate elimination, jumping on high surfaces
3. Desensitize your pet to the sights, sounds, and smells of a new baby
   Sights: crib, changing table, toys, diaper bag, playpen, highchair
   Sounds: crying, screaming, gurgling, laughing baby (tape record a friend's baby)
   Smells: powder, lotions, baby oil, diapers (dirty one with ammonia and water), bottles and formula.

   It might even be a good idea to have a doll that you hold and carry around, put powder and lotion on, change its diaper, give it a bath, etc., so that your pet gets used to these new activities in the house. Take your dog on his walks with a stroller so that he learns to walk nicely beside it.

   It is important that you introduce these things to your pet before the baby arrives. Cats and dogs have very sensitive ears and a very acute sense of smell. Introducing all of these new things and a new baby at the same time could cause severe stress in your pet.

   Make the introduction of any new sight, sound, or smell a positive experience. Pair it with a special food treat, a fun play session, or extra attention. This will help your pet adjust to the changes and make him feel much better about them.

4. Consider what your pets new routine will be after the baby arrives and change it now (walks, feeding time, play time, cuddle-time, etc.).
5. Let your pet first explore any areas that will be off-limits (nursery) and then exclude him from them well before the baby arrives. A screen door on the nursery is a great idea to keep cats and dogs out but allow them to still hear, smell, and see the baby.
6. Create a private, comfortable "retreat" for your pet to go to when things get hectic. Form a positive association with this place (crate or out-of-the-way room) by spending quality time there, feeding him there, or giving him extra special treats or toys there. This way when you need to confine him after the baby arrives he will not feel like he is being banished.

7. Desensitize your pet to things babies and kids WILL do to them. Hugs, rough petting, reaching towards his face, quick jerky movements, screaming near his ears, pulling his tail and ears, poking him in the eye, looking directly into his eyes, even hitting, stepping on, or tripping over. Using practice sessions, gradually increase the intensity of these behaviors towards your pet while pairing them with an EXTRA- SPECIAL food treat.
8. Cat owners: be aware of the risks of Toxoplasmosis. The organism which causes toxoplasmosis is sometimes found in cat feces, raw meats or garden soil. A pregnant woman who is exposed to toxoplasmosis during her first trimester risks harm to her fetus (mental retardation, developmental abnormalities or miscarriage).

   Take the following precautions: do not change the litter box, wear rubber gloves when gardening, wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat.

While mom and the baby are still at the hospital

Bring home a blanket and piece of clothing with the baby's scent on it for your pet to investigate. Tape-record your baby crying, gurgling, or just breathing and play the tape at home. Don't forget to make a positive association by offering a special treat or fun game when introducing these things.

The meeting day

Mom should enter the house alone and greet the pet because he will be excited to see her following her absence. Someone else should then bring the baby into the house and sit quietly on the sofa. Let your pet investigate the baby (dogs should be on a leash at first). Stay relaxed and positive. If you act nervous, your pet will be nervous too. Praise your pet for calm behavior.

From now on

Never leave your pet and your baby together unsupervised!!

Make sure you give your pet plenty of attention - both with and without the baby around.

Recognize the signs that your pet is feeling stressed and try to help him through this time of change. Signs of stress in dogs and cats include: excessive vocalization (barking/whining; meowing/howling), restlessness, lethargy, anorexia, destructive behavior, hiding, inappropriate elimination (urinating or defecating in house or outside litter box or spraying), panting, pacing, excessive grooming, increased aggression, attention seeking behaviors.