

I am expecting my first child. What can I do to help my dog and cats adjust to the new baby?

Congratulations on your growing family! There will be a lot of changes in your household when the baby arrives. The sooner you begin preparing your pets for these changes, the easier it will be for everyone in the family.

The first thing you can do is teach your pets to ask permission before jumping onto your lap or the furniture. Each pet should sit politely until invited up. If they jump up without invitation - stand up to displace them from your lap, ask them to sit, sit back down yourself, and then reward your pet for sitting politely. If you want to allow them on the furniture or your lap, you can then invite them up with a command or signal giving them permission to do so. Repeat as needed until your pet automatically sits on the floor instead of leaping onto the furniture.

Practice holding a baby doll while walking and when you sit down. This will allow your pets to get used to seeing you holding a "baby", and practice polite greetings before the newborn comes home.

You also want to teach your pets the rules about the nursery. Will they be allowed in the room? Will they be kept out with the use of a baby gate? Be consistent with these rules to make them clear to your pets. No one is in trouble; these are just the new rules. Spend time in the nursery reading a book and relaxing. Keep your pets occupied outside the room with chew bones, a stuffed Kong, or treat ball for the cats.

If you will take your dog for walks with the new baby, start practicing with a stroller now. It is a lot of work to control a stroller and an excited dog! If your dog never learned to heel, seek the help of a skilled trainer to work on your pup's leash manners. Invite a friend or family member to walk with you so one person can control the stroller and another control the dog. Give your dog treats and/or carry a toy to reward them for not jumping on or in front of the stroller.

Once the baby is born, bring home a blanket with the baby's scent or a soiled diaper to allow the pets to sniff and get accustomed to the new smells.

If you practice these tips, your pets will be more relaxed once the new baby arrives. If at any point your pets demonstrate aggression or you have questions, seek the help of a qualified trainer or veterinarian. Best wishes!

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