



When worlds are
set to collide,
some simple
preparation can
ease the stresses
on all involved

BY HEATHER HUDSON

Making Room for Baby



Denial to acceptance

Five years into her reign as most doted-upon member of our household, our exuberant, eight-pound “Schnoodle,” a Schnauzer-Poodle cross named Maggie, arrived home from a pleasant weekend “away” to discover that she’d been deposed. Where her overflowing basket of toys normally sat was a lace-edged bassinet—and all eyes in the house were fixed upon its contents.

Her groggy parents greeted her half-heartedly; her formerly loving extended family barely glanced at her. Confused, she worked the room for the kind of attention her presence normally elicited. No response. Within moments, there was a squeaky toy at every foot. Still nothing. In desperation, she pulled out the trick reserved only for emergencies: an accident on the floor.

When plucked from a sulk in the corner to meet her new “sister,” Maggie refused to look directly at the baby and actually twisted her little body away from the bassinet. She clearly didn’t like her new position as a peripheral member—formerly glittering star—of our small universe.

A few weeks later, everyone was better adapted to our new lifestyle. Maggie had learned to share our laps with baby Quinn, eagerly settling into every group nap, and we made extra efforts to offer one-on-one time with her at least once a day. Two years later, our ongoing challenge is fostering a loving and gentle relationship between our two “daughters.”

Looking back, I wish we had more carefully prepared Maggie for the upheaval caused by the arrival of our baby. Surely there are strategies to ease the transition from pampered pooch to “the dog” as a new family structure works the kinks out.

Preparing for baby

According to Ottawa, Ont., animal behaviourist Kathleen Collins, there are ways to mitigate the distress and jealousy of a newly dethroned canine “child.”

To determine just how much preparation a dog needs, first you need to be aware of her temperament around children. “If she appears nervous, or is older, sick or has sensory deficits like deafness or blindness, she will not

be as tolerant to the chaos that is part of a family with kids,” Collins explains.

It helps if your dog responds to basic commands. If not, it might be a good idea to enrol in obedience school—Collins says no dog is too old to learn—to refresh her memory of instructions such as “sit,” “down,” “stay,” “go away” or “leave it.”

If your dog is easily stressed, suffers from separation anxiety, or you have concerns about her ability to adjust to the changes a new baby brings, Collins says she may benefit from a preview of what life will look like in the months to come.

- If your dog isn’t used to being handled, gently tug on her ears, nose, tail and feet: common areas for children to grab. With each poke, say, “What’s that?” and reward her for enduring the exploration.
- Introduce the stroller into your daily walks. Both people and dogs need to get used to the new rhythm of walking with a baby. In the car, whether your dog likes to stretch out in the back seat or hop from window to window, the earlier you train her to sit still, the easier her adjustment to the fact of a car seat.
- As your baby’s due date draws near, set up the house in the way it might look when your infant takes over. Think *utter disarray*. A Jolly Jumper in the doorway, a collection of strange, rattling toys in the living room, a pile of freshly laundered (or recently soiled) clothes on the couch. Teach your dog to stay away from things you don’t want her to mouth.
- Your dog may not be accustomed to people crawling on the floor, but that’s where you’ll likely hang out as your baby lounges on a blanket or activity mat. Spend some time on all fours before the baby arrives so your dog gets used to obeying your commands while you are in a “subordinate” position.

If this sounds like more than you’d bargained for, you’ll be pleased to know that Dr. Greg Usher, a veterinarian based in Toronto, says that in his experience dogs are usually quite adaptable and don’t need much conditioning before a baby joins their household.

“When people express their concern about how their dog is coping with a new baby, I often find the problem is

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about their not having as much time for the dog as they did before the baby. They're extrapolating this guilt onto the dog, who is usually adjusting fine."

Hmm, could Maggie's initial accident have simply been an overfull bladder?

Introducing dog and baby

Once you've implemented some of the suggested adjustments, your dog may be conditioned to the (not so) subtle changes of atmosphere in your house by the time baby arrives. Now, how do you actually introduce the two loves of your life?

Collins says that "a tired dog is a well-behaved dog," so it's helpful to have someone take your pooch for a good, long romp on the day baby is to arrive home. She also recommends that Mom precede the baby to greet the dog, particularly if she's been away for a few days. And there seems to be some merit to the old standby of first allowing your dog to sniff a blanket that contains the baby's scent. This breeds familiarity prior to direct contact.

If you're concerned about your dog's enthusiasm when the guest of honour arrives, you must ensure you have control of him for the initial introduction. Usher says your dog will be curious about this new little being. Allow him to approach the baby and sniff for as long as he likes. He may want to lick baby's face, which may make some new parents nervous. If you hold his collar, you will be able to gently but firmly control him and keep the atmosphere relaxed for everyone. A soft "No, no" and an offer of a treat instead should cause him to happily redirect his focus.

Fostering a good relationship

No matter how well you think you've prepared, there will invariably be some initial upheaval in the household. Both Collins and Usher agree on some key principles to keep in mind as your family gels:

- Never leave your dog and child together unsupervised. No matter how sweet-natured your dog or how placid your baby, their unpredictable natures often clash and the results could be tragic.
- Make an effort to keep the dog's routine as normal as possible, including walks and mealtimes. Dogs will forgive a little displacement as long as they can expect exercise and food at regular intervals.
- Ensure that fun things happen whenever the dog is around the baby. This may mean giving a treat every time the dog endures a poke or two, or sits quietly next to your infant instead of slobbering all over her. Collins suggests incorporating the dog into life with baby as much as possible: throw a ball for him while holding the baby, or (weather permitting) take him along for a car ride when running errands.

PHOTO: TOM SADOWSKI



• Give the dog a place of refuge in the house—a bed or crate, or even space behind the couch. Particularly important when your baby starts to become mobile, this is when the command “go away” (or “leave”) comes in handy. Dogs are often relieved when told they can escape.

If you’re still concerned about your canine’s ability to cope, Collins recommends consulting an animal trainer or behaviourist for advice. “The goal is to integrate dogs into society. It doesn’t hurt to get help with that.”

We’ll keep that in mind for next time. ■

Heather Hudson (heather.hudson@sympatico.ca) is a freelance writer based in Toronto. When she's not fostering a loving relationship between her attention-seeking dog and dog-loving toddler, she writes health and general-interest articles for magazines such as Active Woman Canada, Pregnancy, Canadian Newcomer and City Parent.

Minneapolis-based photographer Tom Sadowski has extensive location and studio experience photographing children and animals. Along with hosting nationally recognized clients, Tom contributes his time and photography to charitable organizations that benefit children and animals worldwide. Feel free to look over his website (www.sadowskiphoto.com) and send an email... Tom books private commissions as well.

The Sounds of Baby

Sounds to help desensitize pets to baby's imminent arrival

- adorable baby sounds and subtle toy noises designed to intrigue your four-legged friend (11:30)
- provoking baby sounds and stimulating toy noises to arouse your pet's curiosity and develop his patience (9:50)
- challenging baby sounds aimed at increasing your pet's tolerance and acceptance of baby (12:35).



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