New Dog or New Baby

I’ve had my 3 girls, who were brought up with dogs and my fair share of puppies. Pre children, the dogs I had were puppies and had grown up with just me as a family. Once married, and the children came along, well how the dog’s world had to change. Up until then the dogs were able to be couch potatoes, probably the most excitement they had would be the post man or the odd visitor. In the main a very quiet life. When my children started to toddle, the big boy J,D would look at them with big wide eyes, just as he did with newly weaned puppies when they would be barrelling around the room, running in between his legs, millipedes with fur, “What are these things? They smell weird, J,D would run and hide behind the couch with grumbles under his breath, *Growling … growling.* It was a little unnerving having a 90-pound intact male German Shepherd vibrating like a tuning fork around my little bundles of pinkness. But with my favourite remedy, peanut butter and the little experience I had training dogs, we eventually overcame this reluctance. That first year of mixing dogs and babies was stressful, but it taught me more than any book could. In fact, nobody really tells you what to expect when you bring a new baby home to an older dog. The advice books tell you what to do to prepare your dog for the arrival, but there’s not much information about how to prepare yourself for what happens when things get a little bumpy. I feel it almost a taboo subject. Let me just say here, is some hard learnt advice about both sides of the fence, acclimatising dogs to little kids and teaching little kids to share a home with four legged siblings. And while it goes without saying, Yes, I will say it, of course, say it If at any time you are concerned about your dog’s behaviour, see your vet or canine behaviourist, get professional advice.

The advice books just don’t seem to translate real life.

The whole blanket from the hospital thing. Walk around the house with a doll and talk mindlessly to it. As if our dogs have no common sense and can’t see through our guise. It’s no guarantee that your dog is going to seamlessly transition from life before baby to the new nuclear family reality. Let’s face it our dogs are smarter than that, they know the doll isn’t a baby. But what they do know is that everything in their world is changing. As your pregnancy progresses, everything about you starts to change, from your gait to your hormones to your routine. New furniture shows up. Rooms get rearranged. Your anxiety level peaks.

Any major life change requires an adjustment period, and dogs are no different. Just assume that this will be the case and provide your dog the space, both mental and physical, giving them time to figure things out. When things get hectic, or out of control, give your dog crate time with a good chew. Don’t expect them to react as though everything was normal for the first few months, it may be more paint by numbers.

Listen to the dog people

Babies and kids make people emotional, there is no way of getting around that. First time grandmothers who in other aspects of their lives are unflappable, turn into frantic bundles of nervous jellies when your pooch so much as looks sideways at the new arrival. Amid all the confusion and exhaustion of a new baby, it’s easy to let other people get into your head. If it’s an experienced dog person, that’s one thing. But if it’s someone whose sum total exposure to canines is they have a dog, then keep that in perspective. People who understand dogs understand canine body language and instincts, people who don’t are liable to misinterpret even friendly gestures. “He’s LICKING HER! Oh, my God, HE’S LICKING HER!” and can offer some rather insane advice.

**A few years ago, I heard some chairside chatter in the cafe, a woman turned to the new-born grandmother, who said her daughter would be coming home from the hospital later that week. Concerned that the family dog was not going to accept the baby readily, the plan was to tranquilize him. I almost swallowed my cup, and when I could come up for air, I pointed out that this was a supremely bad idea, in fact, being woozy and out of control of his own body, would more likely put the dog *more* on edge, not less.**

Dogs’ can read your body language very well, your mood, anxiety some of the animal communicators would say, your thoughts. If you are anxious and worried about your dog’s reaction to the baby, you are in a sense encouraging him to be. Find that sweet spot between vigilant and freaked out. Practice feeling it. Practice breathing normally and not holding your breath when the two are in the room together, that’s the first sign to your dog that there is something to be worried about.Don’t run film loops in your head about the worst-case scenarios. Do try to envision a calm, serene encounter. This sounds simple, and in theory, it is, but in practice, it can be the most daunting hurdle you face, especially if you have a dog who’s having difficulty with the new-baby transition.

Take baby steps

The most important thing to remember with anything involving dogs, or kids, or dogs and kids together. You can’t expect a finished product right out of the gate. Plan out your encounters between dog and child, no matter what the age and start simple. Create tiny successes and build from there. In my J,D case, he exhibited a whole spectrum of emotions, starting first with excitement, leaping and snuffing. When he smelled the baby through the bars of the crib, he would breathe their scent in so deeply he sounded like an Electrolux. Once the novelty wore off, and the baby became a fixed part of our routine, then bewilderment set in. He was fine as long as they didn’t move. Once they did, the panicked looks and running away started.

We dealt with his behaviour in a number of ways. To help centre his emotions gently, I added some appropriate treatment, we would use some great herbal remedies, today there are some really good ones, like calm extra or balance, start these a week or two before baby comes home. (In my experience, I have found the individual essences work well). Whenever J.D was around the baby and reacted without fear or concern, he’d get a treat. To encourage him to contact, I’d balance a piece of string cheese on the baby’s blanket. (He was the gentlest dog when taking food but don’t try this if your dog is a snatcher.)

Corrections really don’t work when fear or anxiety is at the root of the problem, they only make things worse. But if I did hear a grumble when he was sat beside me, on the couch with a baby and bottle, he was calmly but firmly commanded NO and ejected from his spot.

Moving forward a few years. J,D was sleeping in his bed, the children and I was playing a boisterous game of tag with the kids being chased around the kitchen and garden. When their screams reached his ears, he bounced off his bed, trotted over to me, and took me by the forearm gently between his powerful jaws. Course I stopped, the kids’ screaming died down, and he released his grip, without so much as a tooth mark. Rather than being taken aback, I was pleased, He was telling me, eloquently but wordlessly, that he was worried about the children, and I needed to stop their screaming. NOW.

**Your dog’s crate.** The books all say it, and its importance cannot be understated, **YOUR DOG’S CRATE NEEDS TO BE HIS SANCTERY**. and it is off limits to children. I can tell you from experience that children think a crate is the coolest kind of playhouse, it’s small, it’s snug, it’s forbidden, and therefore irresistible.

I would always give the sternest kind of look or voice for any kind of messing around with the dogs’ crates, not only going in them, but opening them without permission. My children grew up understanding that letting a dog out of his crate at the wrong time could have serious consequences. Being a multi-dog household with frequent visitors who don’t always get along with our resident dogs, there are cases were allowing children to open crates have had a bad outcome and a potential disaster. I’m not going to sugar coat it if you allow this, this has happened, children have been attacked, because you have allowed your children to open the dogs cage, when your children have had friends round. Children aren’t the only ones who can mess up in this regard, if you have babysitters, nannies, visiting relatives who take on dog care as part of your household helping you, you just cannot rely on them to be as vigilant as you would be. Make sure everyone knows the rules about the crate.

Teach children to respect puppies/dogs

Just as dogs need to be trained, so do children. At the earliest age, you can begin to teach the fundamentals of respecting animals and their boundaries. Always reminding the children, around our house “TALES ARE NOT FOR PULLING”. a handy catch phrase to repeat when a yank of any body part looks imminent.

In my house, however, the anatomy did not generalize. One day I found my 5 year old, crouched beside J,D, who was sprawled out on his side. Long past his initial worry about the kids, in fact, as the previous story shows, he now fancied himself as their personal bodyguard. As I walked by, my daughter reached out to J,D, who jerked his head up suddenly, then sighed and dropped it to the ground, resigned. “What did you do?” I asked, who looked very pleased with herself. “I squeezed his bum,” she announced proudly, pointing at his unmentionables. That defiantly came with a definite got a swift NO you must never do that.

**Reality check.** As my daughter’s game, of tug demonstrates all too clearly, potentially dangerous situations between kids and dogs happen. Even the best-behaved child disobeys now and then, even the most trustworthy decides to see what it feels like to break the rules. I was fortunate that I had a dog with a great temperament, with a high tolerance about his personal space among his “pack.” Something I had worked on, I always taught all of my dogs to be tolerant, when being brushed or at bath time. Holding onto their tails or ears, looking into there mouths etc.

I remember several years back, hearing a tragic story in the local newspaper. A little girl had been badly bitten in the backyard by the family dog, The girl had been dancing and shouting waving and playing with her scarf, when the dog went to snatch the scarf and had bitten the girls arm quite badly. It was a complete accident.

Later I was interviewed as an expert canine behaviourist and running training classes at the time. The newspaper reporter, announced to me that most definitely that parents should ensure that children and dogs are never left unsupervised. I asked if she had kids. Of course, she didn’t. If you have kids, you know that sometimes it’s just unavoidable to leave the two species together, if only for a minute to run some laundry to the kitchen or check the dinner on the stove. Life happens. Constant supervision would be ideal, but sometimes you just can’t be in control of everything. That’s not an excuse that’s reality. In 99 percent of the time, things go absolutely perfectly. But then there are those rare, tragic events that remind us that there are two parts to the “companion dog.” Love them as we do, they are animals, with sharp teeth and instincts and reactions that we sometimes cannot predict. Always err on the side of caution. Do both your children and your dog a favour, in being as conservative as possible, and supervising as much as you can, especially with visiting children in the house. When in doubt use a crate. A bell cannot be un rung, an egg cannot be unscrambled, and some “mistakes” on the part of an otherwise stable and loving dog, can and will exact a heavy toll on both you and your dog.

**Teach kids to speak dog.** At every age, kids will have new questions about their interactions with the family dog, and you need to keep your antennae primed for them. One of my children then 8, crying informed me that our newest puppy, no longer liked her because she was nipping at hands and feet. When I told her that the puppy was getting nippy because she had been playing with her litter mates, in the same way, and dogs wrestle with their mouths just as she and her sisters do with their hands, she broke into a big grin. So, she said not only does the puppy like me, but she was also trying to play with me.

At an early age, I taught my children to eat at the table, Useful when they are nibbling on a cheese stick and are surrounded by wide eyed dogs. Standing on the couch just is not the same as sat at the table, children have a good chance at keeping it. Seeking the “high ground” feet up on the couch, always works when two dogs are playing and the action looks intense, or when a new dog comes over and is introduced into the pack. The children are made to understand that when there is a lot of excitement among the dogs, they need to get out of the way, lest they get mixed up and inadvertently knocked over if things escalate. Dogs even small ones can knock a child over. Another thing they learned was how their behaviour could elicit unwanted reactions from the dogs. If they squealed and ran, chances are the new puppy would chase after them, and seek to engage them with those pin-sharp baby teeth. They learned how to exchange puppy nips by offering a toy, and, as they got older, how to dissuade a humper using the index finger and the command NO. I’m all for positive reinforcement, but when I have a 90-pound male German Shepherd looking for a hug, you need to teach children how to stop the advancement.

**Harness the helpfulness.** Younger children love to be helpers, and mine were willing to do even the most mundane tasks, stuffing Kong’s with peanut butter, in hot weather, wetting, and freezing washcloths, and ice cubes when teething, filling the water bowl up. The children learned never to permit a doggie kiss on the lips. Our home rule was and still is, no face contact for any reason. When I have a litter of puppies, I could not ask for better puppy socializers. Children are in the whelping box constantly. They delight in handling the puppies, naming them, noting their differences in appearance and temperament. They are never there unsupervised and have been taught to be gentle, if they break any rule, they lose their box privileges. This results in puppies who have had contact with children, the puppies are programmed to love little ones, as adult dogs, when they see a little human, even on the horizon, their bodies waggle and wiggle in delight. It’s important to remember, that children, like dogs, are individuals. Some children love to be around dogs’, but others could take them or leave them. I suspect both nature and nurture have a hand in being “a doggie person”. Some kids are just more drawn to these furry bundles than others, and that’s OK.

Teach your child respect. Teaching respect for dogs is something all parents should instil in their children at a young age. Just as dogs are trained, so too, are children in how they behave around dogs. Whether a dog shares your life at present or not, kids should know the dos and don’ts of how to behave around and with a dog.

The late great veterinarian Dr Sophia Yin says the same things that drive a dog to bite the family kids are the same things that cause adults to need a break from kids. For example, people don’t like it when someone sticks their dirty hands into their meal. The same holds for dogs, as dogs want to be left alone to eat in peace. Children are taught that stealing toys is wrong, and respect for dogs includes leaving their toys alone. Dogs should be trained to drop or give up a toy with positive reinforcement by the adult owner.

Sometimes, dogs have special needs, and kids may not understand what’s happening to their beloved pets. Having an honest talk with your children about illnesses or physical differences is important, especially when it comes to the family dog.

Here are my favourite tips to teach respect for dogs to children of all ages:

**Teach Children Respect for Dogs at A Young Age**

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| THINGS TO NEVER DO TO A DOG |
| 1. Never place your hands in a dog’s meal, food bowl, or try to pull food from a dog’s mouth. |
| 2. Don’t steal toys from a dog, especially toys in a dog’s mouth. |
| 3. Teach kids never to put their face near a dog and to maintain proper social distance. |
| 4. Do not disturb a dog while he is sleeping. |
| 5. Don’t roughly handle a dog, as all dogs deserve respect. |
| 6. Never ride on, step on, or climb on a dog. Dogs are not meant to be ridden. |
| 7. Do not pull a dog’s tail. |
| 8. Do not slap or hit a dog. |
| 9. Never run-up to a dog and scream at him. |
| 10. Do not share your people’s food with a dog. It may harm him. |
| 11. Do not pet a dog without asking first. |
| 12. Never squeeze any part of a dog’s body, including his face. |
| 13. Most dogs do not like to be hugged, so avoid this. |
| 14. Screaming is rude and loud and can cause a dog to fear children. |
| 15. Don’t laugh at, ridicule, or make fun of dogs with your friends. |

Top of Form

**Chicken or the egg?** What’s the better approach, get your dog first, and then add children? Or acquire the dog as a puppy once the children are old enough, so that there are no adjustment issues? Tough call, and a very individual one. Being a canine psychologist and master dog trainer, it is difficult to say, then what a first-time owner may face. adding dogs to a household with children, I can honestly say that the amount of time you spent training and socializing your first dogs is significantly easier. But that’s not to say that having a dog before children will not make them hooligans, but in the push-me-pull-you that is parenthood, you can’t do it all. Having dogs first gives you a chance to enjoy them fully, learn their quirks and idiosyncrasies, and lay the relationship groundwork for the challenges that come with children and an expanding household.

Another advantage to bringing children into a household with dogs is the immune system benefit. Studies have shown that children who have grown up with dogs (and cats) are less likely to develop asthma and allergies to a wide variety of allergens, but here’s the clincher exposure during should be in the first year of life is key.  After that, the preventive benefits are severely decreased.

**Know your breed.** Beagles are smaller stacked consummate family dog, and once mine recalibrated their definition of our family, we were in for smooth sailing. Children are foreign things to Beagles until, they came to realize they were pack members. Once they understood that, beagles become their best friends, their protector.Other breeds may have different default settings. Mastiffs, for example, are hardwired to adore women and children, even ones they do not know, they may be quicker than a Ridgeback to embrace new human pack members. Terriers, by contrast, sometimes have less patience with small children. Again, your breeder or a reliable trainer can help you sort out some of these questions or give you an in-depth evaluation if your dog is a mix, or a rescue of any breed or combination whose history you may not know.

**Step back. Kids and dogs are a lot of work, both can make spectacular messes if not supervised properly, and it takes a lot of time to raise them properly. They bring to the surface all your shortcomings, as in the crunch of bringing them up you confront old patterns and programming that makes you work on yourself, too. But their gift is their visceral delight in the world that many of us adults’ lost sight of long ago. When you watch a relationship between a child and their dog the whispered confidences, the gleeful play bowing, the sheer joy of running in the grass together you rediscover what it’s all about. And as the dog turn Gray and then white and then are no more. When they pass away, and your other grows older by the minute, it seems. I don’t have any better explanation for children than the one I give myself. The dogs leave to make room for the new ones to follow, to give us a fresh infusion of joy and wonder at this marvellous, unfolding miracle we called life.**