

Getting Buster Ready for Baby

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You're due in two months, and you realize you've done nothing to prepare your dog for baby's arrival! First, you'll need to desensitize Buster to all things baby! A doll wrapped in a blanket (though it won't smell the same), baby crying sounds on Youtube, a stroller, a Baby Bjorn, the smell of diaper cream, a baby swing, a play mat that makes sounds or has blinking lights. Don't just shove these things into your dog's face; let him first observe them from across the room. Reward him with treats and praise for "bravery." If he wants to interact more closely with these items, great, but let it be on his terms.

Once baby is born, introduce your dog to her smell on a blanket. Some dogs won't want to get near an infant, but some will be curious. Regardless, do you really want the "teeth end" of your dog near baby? Her skin will be incredibly delicate, and innocent, playful mouthing can cause injury. Your dog has an amazing sniffer; he doesn't have to be that close to smell her!

Training is crucial BEFORE baby arrives. Teach incompatible behaviors. Buster can't be jumping if he's in a stay and can't counter surf if he's on his bed. Impulse control, settling behaviors, "leave it" (food dropped by baby, diaper pail, baby itself), back up, and "wait" at the door are helpful commands!

Keep in mind, schedule changes can cause behavior shifts and potty accidents for your dog. It's not because he's trying to spite you - he's stressed! How do you react when you're stressed? Sure, you don't go urinating on rugs, but I bet your behavior changes! Our dogs are no different. They need exercise and positive mental stimulation - training, learning a few tricks - even when we don't feel up to it or have much free time. A dog who is physically AND mentally tired is better-behaved! Try not to scold your dog for getting into things, like baby's toys or the diaper pail. Prevent issues by blocking off rooms, or redirect and teach your dog what you DO want him to do! Have your spouse reward him for settling on his bed and while you nurse or play with baby. This makes it a positive experience for Buster and teaches a good go-to behavior. Dogs can learn context cues easily, so if you practice having him settle every time you do certain things in certain rooms, he will start doing these things more easily over time!

You will be having lots of visitors once baby arrives. When all else fails or when you need to keep your dog busy, give him a Kong stuffed with xylitol-free peanut butter, low-fat cottage cheese, or canned dog food. If a lot of commotion stresses or over-stimulates him, let him rest in another room. Always give him an out!

Above all, always supervise every interaction, especially as baby gets older. There is no situation more precarious than a dog and a toddler! (Check out my future articles to learn how to manage life with both!)

Rebecca Mason is a certified dog trainer and owner of Love Them Train Them LLC in Birmingham. She is a former elementary school teacher and is passionate about working

with families to channel their dogs' energy positively. She believes every dog has potential, no matter the age or breed! www.lovetheirtrainthem.com