

Fido...meet junior!

Knock on the front door of Jennifer and Barton Young's home and you're more likely to hear the scratching of claws on the entryway floor, accompanied by the cacophony of dogs barking, than the cry of their four-month-old daughter, Sophia. Of the five family members living in the Young household, three of them are dogs. And those pups had a definite opinion of their place in the household pecking order, before baby Sophia arrived on the scene.

While all three of the Youngs' canine companions have adjusted quite well to having a baby around, Winston, their one-year-old English Bull Dog has come up against one particular challenge.

"One time, we'd left the baby's bottle on the stairs and Winston found it," Barton recalls. "He got a few good sucks off the bottle before we got it away from him. Ever since, he's always trying to get the baby's bottle, and is always hanging around when we're getting one ready for her."

When asked what role the dogs played in their family life before bringing home their daughter, Barton laughs while undeniably asserting, "Definitely, our children."

And the Youngs are not alone. Nancy Tanner, CPDT, owner of Paws & People, LLC, a dog training organization, acknowledges this extremely common pre-baby family dynamic. Especially here in Bozeman, where it seems there are more dogs per capita than coffee shops.

But Tanner cautions, "Having a very loved and over-indulged pet can create problems when a baby is brought into the family." She goes on to describe the common problem of the family pooch mounting a serious jealousy campaign when he realizes the amount of pre-baby attention he's accustomed to has taken a sudden nose dive. This jealousy can manifest as problem behavior, including: Aggressiveness, destructiveness, or even lethargy and social withdrawal. These behavioral changes are often exacerbated when the amount of exercise the animal is used to also declines.

A proactive way to handle the decrease in attention the family dog will likely experience after a baby's arrival, says Davina Schoen, owner of Montana Academy of Dog Training, is to "gradually start giving the dog less attention during the pregnancy. This will help him prepare for the change in the amount of time you have for him after you bring the baby home."

Another excellent tactic to help our pets prepare for the arrival of a newborn child, says Nancy Tanner, "...is to bring several baby items into the house early on in the pregnancy. Move them around the house, make noises with them—shake the baby rattles, play the musical toys—do this on a daily basis so they become a normal part of the household environment." She recommends starting this process as early as possible, and throughout the duration of the pregnancy. Other recommendations she offers include:

- Set up the chair you will likely be spending a lot of time with the baby in during breast/bottle feedings. Spend some time in this location each day, and practice giving your dog(s) the "sit", "down" and "stay" commands so she can practice this good behavior ahead of time.
- Get your stroller early, and take your furry pal for walks *with* the stroller so he can get used to walking calmly and safely alongside you.

- Introduce your pet to baby items with strong scents, such as diapers, wipes, lotions and scented toys. This will help to further desensitize the animal to the up-coming household changes associated with the baby's arrival.

Other recommendations include selecting a dog toy which you can place near the baby, which will transfer his scent onto the toy. Before introducing your pet to the baby, let her spend some time with the baby-scented toy first.

“Start way ahead of time, and take up training with your dog well before the baby's birth,” recommends Schoen. She explains that the better level of obedience you have instilled within your dog prior to the baby's birth, the smoother the transition you can expect after your little cherub's arrival. “Spend a lot of time down on the ground with [the dog]. Enter their territory often, so they get used to having to respect a person in their own space. This will translate to the dog's willingness to respect the baby when he or she becomes mobile later on.”

But dogs aren't the only domestic animals we should consider when preparing to welcome a new baby into the family.

“Because cats don't tend to be trained,” says Tanner, “they're more likely to go wherever they want in the home. You may need to purposely keep the cat out of the rooms you don't want him in, such as the baby's room.” Nonetheless, preparing an animal ahead of time can decrease their likelihood of associating the new household changes with the baby—which can otherwise create unwanted, and potentially harmful tension between the pet and the child.

Susan Barrows, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine at Bozeman's Animal Medical Center, suggests that domesticated birds can also suffer a difficult transition when it comes to sharing their owners' attention with a new baby.

“They tend to be very bonded with their people, and will often feel put out when they perceive they're being neglected.” Barrows goes on to describe a fairly common manifestation of a bird's emotional distress: Self-mutilating behaviors such as pulling out their own feathers and picking at their skin.

“While young children can learn compassion, responsibility and kindness when interacting with animals...they don't always understand that an animal may become aggressive when approached quickly, batted at or sat upon.” Her best advice: *never* leave an animal unattended with a young child. And, make sure you still offer your pet quality time and attention every day.

Here in Bozeman, we love our animals. We love them dearly. For those of us who's families are punctuated with members of the animal kingdom before our *human* children come along, we can help to ease their transition by following these basic tenets: Start preparing early, plan for special “animal time” after the baby's arrival to lessen the impact of the family dynamic change on the pet, and when it comes time to introduce your baby to the animal, go slowly—in a constantly supervised environment.

Other Resources:

http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/introducing_your_pet_and_new_baby.html

http://www.parenthood.com/articles.html?article_id=4685

http://www.healthypet.com/library_view.aspx?id=23

Also:

- your veterinarian
- your pediatrician
- a local dog/pet trainer