

BABY 0–12 months

playing with pets

Everything you need to know about letting your infant befriend animals

by CHRISANNE GRISE

MY CORGI IS a big hit with older babies—practically every time he passes a stroller on the street, he gets stares and squeals. What’s with all the puppy love? Babies are drawn to pets for many reasons: They’re often soft, they make entertaining movements, and they have an animated face that responds to humans, says Marsha Gerdes, Ph.D., a child psychologist at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. “Pets are more exciting than iPads and plastic toys because they’re so multisensory.” If you have an animal at home, you can help him develop a good relationship with your child from the start. Follow these steps and your two little ones will be best buddies in no time.

➔ Stage a smooth intro.

When you bring your newborn home, focus on getting your family settled first. But take it slow when the time comes to get your pet and your baby together. “Infants are a different size from adults, and they smell and move differently too—so your pet won’t see the baby as a tiny human but as an entirely new creature,” says Kat Miller, Ph.D., an animal behaviorist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Hold your baby in your lap, talk happily (“Molly, this is our doggie, Rex”), and give your pet the opportunity to approach. Reward every friendly move he makes—such as sniffing or investigating—with praise and treats. This way, he’ll

form a positive association with being around your baby and will want to continue developing a relationship. You may have to be patient: Some pets need a few sessions like this before they work up the courage to come forward.

➔ Set a schedule.

Your pet is a creature of habit, so when her routine changes, she might become fearful or clingy, or start showing signs of separation anxiety, says Kirsten Theisen, director of pet-care issues at The Humane Society of the United States. Try to establish a walking, feeding, and playtime schedule for her that you can follow with your new baby at home. However, don’t worry too much if you can’t always stick to it. “New parents need to give themselves a break and not feel guilty for changing their pet’s world,” says Theisen.

➔ Practice safe play.

Once your baby and pet become acquainted, it’s fine to give them plenty of supervised playtime—just be sure to never leave them alone, even for a short period. Pay close attention to their body language, and if you notice that either one seems tense or uncomfortable, separate them immediately. In addition, set up areas in the house for each to be alone when you can’t keep an eye on them—for example, you could make your baby’s room off-limits to your animal and set up a pet bed in the corner of the

living room for him to retreat to. “Even before your baby is crawling, tell her ‘That’s Fluffy’s area, and when he goes over there we have to leave him alone,’” Dr. Miller says. With a dog, it’s a good idea to sharpen up on his training too—if you’ve been meaning to teach him not to bark or jump up, attend to those habits now so he’ll be on his best behavior around your infant.

➔ Deal with fears calmly.

Sometimes an animal might make a loud noise or a sudden movement that startles your baby, but a bad experience doesn’t mean he’ll be afraid forever. If your child seems frightened after a scare, try holding him in your arms while standing a good distance away from your pet, says Dr. Gerdes. Continue to expose him from afar until he seems calm. Then gradually move closer until your child is completely comfortable around your pet. Let your baby see that you are relaxed around animals too. “If you’re pushing a stroller down the street and a dog barks loudly, reassure your baby by saying, ‘That’s just a dog! No worries!’ in a cheerful voice,” Dr. Gerdes says.

➔ Encourage bonding.

You want your pet to enjoy spending time with your baby, so try to focus on both of them at the same time. You don’t have to actively play with your pet (you can only do so much at once, after all!), but praise your dog or give your cat a toy while you’re holding your child. You can also let your baby join in the fun by showing her how to pet his soft fur or interact gently with him. Finally, bring your dog along when you and your infant go for a neighborhood stroll. “You’re teaching him that your baby is a good thing in his life, not his competitor,” Dr. Miller explains. “When your pet is calm and friendly, both he and your baby will benefit.” ✕