

# Baby and Animal Kingdom

## Tips to Help Both Worlds Exist Peacefully and Safely

By Katherine Bontrager



### Tips from the Experts

Jennifer McCarthy is a dog trainer with offices in Colorado and Los Angeles. She specializes in dog aggression and has specifically worked with clients in introducing newborns to pets. McCarthy says that most people fail to look at things from the animal's perspective.

"As humans, we always want everyone to intermingle together peacefully, but when you have young children and older animals, sometimes it's best to give the older animal space to relax, sleep, etc., with as [little] stress as possible," McCarthy says. "Older dogs are less tolerant with children than younger ones."

For this reason, McCarthy suggests parents establish a zone for older dogs that your child can't get to – such as a laundry area, off-limits hallway or room that's still close enough to family interaction but protected from a young child's exuberant energy.

"It's just as important for parents to teach children manners around pets as it is to teach their pets manners around their children," McCarthy says. "Being an example for your child in how to pet a dog or cat calmly is important. Teach such rules as 'no running or jumping around dogs' and get them involved as early as possible in pet responsibility. Having a toddler help with feeding time, teaching your toddler how to tell the dog 'sit' or 'down' with calm praise will help the child realize that dogs are not toys. On the same note, this also helps the dog to understand that the child is higher in rank in the pack, as most dogs consider children littermates or even puppies."

In fact, McCarthy runs a class for kids that teaches such important responsibilities as grooming, feeding and care, as well as simple commands. "They learn how to pet a dog properly, why it's not good to go up to strange dogs without asking permission, how to approach a dog properly, how to hold and give treats and why it's important to respect all creatures and wildlife," she says. "Tricks are great for kids because it's fun for them as well as psychologically you are instilling in the dog's mind that they must respect the child."

Dr. Bernadine Cruz is a veterinarian from Laguna Hills, Calif., and a member of Iams Pet Wellness Council. Not only does she work with animals, they've been integrated into her family life from the beginning. "Pets have truly become a part of our families," Dr. Cruz says. "My daughter was raised with animals, and now has three girls of her own, so each of my granddaughters has grown up with cats. And my nieces and nephews all had dogs before they had their children."

The key to successfully integrating little ones and furry one? "They all did a marvelous job in socializing the dogs when they were puppies to a myriad of different sights, sounds and people of all ages," she says. "But toddlers (and children in general) should also be taught respect for pets."

Dr. Cruz abides by McCarthy's advice in letting dogs and cats alone when they're eating. "When dogs are eating, it's their time and sharing is not high on the agenda," she says. "It's also important to teach a child how to properly pet a dog or cat – gently and softly – and to not pull its tail."

### What Your Pet Is Telling You

Even with all the training and precautions in the world, professionals all agree that it's never wise to leave a little one unattended with even the most trusted of pets. Sometimes toddlers get too rambunctious and can make the tamest of animals feel threatened. Your pets will give clear signs when their patience has worn thin.

"Any type of body language that the dogs shows such as pierced eyes, a fixation on the child, stiff back, stalking, growling, nipping, hackles raised, hiding under furniture, shaking, fearful behavior, etc., should be a sign that the child and dog should not be left alone together," McCarthy says. "If a dog is avoiding the child by ignoring them, that's just fine. However, if the child persists, the dog may try to give them a warning or put them in their place by growling or nipping."

But McCarthy is quick to caution that these behaviors are natural. "That's why it's important for parents to understand that it's not always a good idea to constantly subject their pet to constant interaction with a child that won't leave them alone," she says. "It's unfortunate but in today's world, I see far too many dogs being euthanized for biting or nipping when after the fact, we find out that it was a child teasing them or sticking toys in their ears, etc., when parents weren't paying attention."

Dr. Cruz agrees that any pet can bite. "Even small dogs or other small pets can inflict injuries to a child," she says. "Nipping, biting and growling are natural responses to fear, pain, anxiety or the inability to escape certain stimuli (i.e. a 2-year-old). Give the pet a safe zone – a place or area that is off limits to the child. Using baby gates can be a great tool to help segregate children and pets. No dog or cat should be left alone with a child, so it's important that parents supervise when pets and toddlers are together in the same area."

### Providing Peace and Saving Lives

Taking these preventive steps can help bring harmony into your toddler's expanding world and your pet's established territory. And heeding this advice is so important in so many ways. Children who grow up with pets learn vital responsibilities and compassion. And study after study has shown that animals help our health in ways we're only beginning to understand.

But even more critical is that furry lives are at stake. According to The Humane Society, between six and eight millions pets are dumped in shelters every year – and some three or four million are euthanized. A good percentage of these animals were forced out of the homes when a little one was brought back from the hospital.

"It's crucial for parents to take necessary steps when bringing home a newborn or a child into their world," McCarthy says. "So often, life becomes hectic and overwhelming, but if a parent makes time every day for the dog, life will be so much easier. Don't stop walking your dog, and keep them on their regular routine or feeding schedule. Exercise off the property is as essential as breathing for them. If you don't have time, hire a dog walker or get some help from family, friends or neighbors. Be a responsible pet owner and do what it takes to ensure your dogs remain a part of your household – they'll thank you for it!"