

Ask the Trainer

By Sharon Harvey

Q We've just learned that we're going to have a baby. We have a three-year-old dog, Tess, who is the queen of the house. We're worried about how she's going to respond. Is there anything we can do to prepare her?

A One of the biggest mistakes new parents-to-be can make is to assume the dog and baby will love each other. For even the most unspoiled dog, adding a baby to the pack can be a major adjustment. For a queen, it could be devastating! If you think you need to make changes in Tess's habits and behavior, it should be done before the baby comes home. Tess needs to associate the baby with good things rather than the end of her spoiled days.

Dogs who are likely to require work include those who guard toys or food, have a strong prey drive or high chase orientation, are sensitive when handled, are bossy or generally out of control. Gradual desensitization training along with basic obedience will help to improve these behaviors.

Identify all of Tess's "cute" habits that won't be so cute once there's a little one in the house. Replace them with desirable behaviors. For instance, ignore Tess when she jumps up but reinforce her when she sits for greetings. If you won't want her on the bed or furniture anymore, train her to go to a spot, like a dog bed. Reinforce her every time she goes to her spot. Gradually require that she stay there for longer periods of time to get her reward. Eventually, you will be able to send her to her spot when you need her out of the way for a period of time. She will also be able to use her safe spot when she needs to get away from that little invader. When you want to be sure she's not underfoot, get her accustomed to spending quiet time behind a baby gate or in a crate. Introduce these social barriers gradually to minimize the risk of separation anxiety. It helps to reserve a special toy or treat so she learns to look forward to these brief periods of isolation.

Get Tess to enjoy baby-related activities by lavishing her with praise and treats as you act them out. Find a baby doll that flails and cries. With Tess nearby, cradle it, push it in the baby swing, take it for walks,

put it in its crib, change its diapers, feed it and lavish it with baby talk. Get her used to the sound of crying by using a recording. Start by playing it softly and reward her with treats if she's calm. Gradually increase her threshold of tolerance by increasing the volume and continue to reward her for a calm response. Get her used to the new smells, especially the smell of the baby. Bring home a blanket that has your baby's scent on it and let Tess sniff it. She must think that everything to do with the baby is wonderful and fun. Oh, one other thing, close the curtains so the neighbors don't worry!

On a more general training note, it's time to demote Tess from queen to commoner—she's fourth in line for the throne now. As part of accepting her subordinate role, she must reliably respond... Sit, Down, Stay and Come—even when distracted. Start the training NOW! Extinguishing beloved rituals and teaching new behaviors can take time. More importantly, Tess must not associate her loss of privilege or rank with the arrival of the baby.

In a perfect world, we would select and train a dog with the eventuality of adding to our human family in mind. But, if you're willing to take the time to do a bit of remedial work, you'll be setting your baby and Tess up for the friendship of a lifetime.

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If you're having a problem with your cat or dog, call the Rescue Village HelpLine at 440.338.4819, ext. 13 or send an e-mail to askthetrainer@geaugahumane.org. We'll help you solve your problem or refer you to someone who can. The most frequently asked questions will find their way into the Rescue Village Reporter's Ask the Trainer column or onto Q104's Ask the Trainer radio segment that can be heard on Sunday's Wilde & Fee Morning Show during the 8 o'clock hour.

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- To shelter and find homes for sick, injured, abused, and abandoned domestic animals that have no other alternatives
- To foster compassion for all living things through education
- To reduce pet overpopulation through spay/neuter programs
- To prevent cruelty by advocating and enforcing animal protection laws