



Episode 1: Introducing Pets to a New Baby with Dr. Katrina Warren

Introducing Pets to a New Baby

Tiffany: Hi everyone, in this week's episode we'll be discussing the best approach when introducing your baby to your pet, how to prepare them for bringing your little one home and what important steps to take to ensure they feel comfortable with this change. I'm so excited to welcome my guest today Dr. Katrina Warren. Katrina is best known for her work across all media platforms as a veterinarian, presenter, and spokesperson. She's also a dog trainer, author, ambassador for a number of incredible charities and the mum. Thanks so much for coming on today Katrina.

Katrina: Thanks so much for inviting me.

Tiffany: So I used to love watching you on Harry's Practice and Totally Wild, actually, so I have lovely memories listening to your voice and talking to you today. Could you start by telling everyone else though a little bit about your background as a vet and why you feel this is such an important topic to cover for first-time parents with pets, Katrina?

Katrina: Yes. Look, I graduated from Vet Science, wow, a long time ago now, back in the '90s and I was very lucky to find a job that allowed me out of the veterinary clinic because I found that the aspect of working with animals they had to be euthanized, really stressful, and I used to end up in tears all the time. And I was very lucky to land a job as a researcher on a children's show called Totally Wild, researching all about animal stories. And then that evolved into a job as a presenter on Totally Wild as their vet doing veterinary or pet related stories which then evolved into a TV show that most people remember me from which is Harry's Practice.

To be honest, most people remember my dog from Harry's Practice more than me and that was Toby the Wonderdog, probably how everybody called it. But over the years, well, I have also experienced motherhood and was a pet owner before having my own baby but I've watched so many families welcome their first baby into the family that was just for kids before and it can be such a huge adjustment for everyone.

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Katrina: (cont...) And having that first baby, as we know, is so stressful, there's so much pressure on the buildup and how you're going to manage everything in your life and then your whole life turns upside down and it's understandable that most people worry about their pets. And if the pet has been the only member of the family that's getting all the attention beforehand, it's very understandable that they can get their nose a little bit out of joint and you can also worry about the whole situation. And I guess also, it's important to understand that the management of introducing their baby and the pet it's for both sides of it, it's for keeping the pet safe which is probably a little more relevant when the baby becomes a toddler but it's also about keeping the baby safe and keeping your pet behavior happy. So they still need to have that mental and physical stimulation even though you are now around the clock looking after a baby.

Tiffaney: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much for sharing a bit more about your background, working with animals, Katrina, it's really fascinating, and you've clearly had a lot of experience and you've been through it yourself when you had to bring your daughter home to meet your pets. And as you've briefly mentioned, I guess, laying down those ground rules and preparing your pet for the arrival of the baby is really important. So when is it best to begin this process though? It can be tricky to work this out I'm sure for everyone listening today. So if you could take us through when it's best to really start that process of getting your pet ready for the baby arriving.

Katrina: I think the process ideally starts the moment you find out you're pregnant because pets love to have routine, they like a stable structure and they get very good at expecting their meals at a certain time and sleeping in a certain place and jumping up on visitors when they come in. So you have to be very honest and a lot of people hate being honest about their pets, they'll be like, oh, my pet just jumps up because it's happy. But then you think, okay, I'm going to have a baby, do I want my pet jumping up? No, I need to train that, and that will take a few months to actually work on that behavior and get it trained properly. There's two different things, there's dogs and cats, it's a little bit different, but dogs in particular, you can start your training a long way in advance, teaching your dog perhaps to go and lie down on their bed or mat whenever you ask them to.

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Katrina: (cont...) And you want to make that a positive thing so you give them treats, every night you say, go and lay on your bed and you give them like a Chewy toy, stuff too they can chew on or a treat for lying and you teach them to stay. So getting those basic obedience lessons well in advance is going to be much better than trying to train a dog while you have a baby and you're trying to breastfeed a baby or prepare something in the kitchen. So from that point of view, I say, as soon as you possibly can. Not all is lost, if there's people listening to this and they're about to pop out their baby in a few weeks time, you can certainly look at making changes now. And I think with preparation, there's the training of the animal but there's also safety things as well about setting up the nursery.

If you don't want your pet to go into that nursery, you can look at putting even a baby gate across the nursery door, a tall one will stop most cats and also dogs and that can give you that little bit of peace of mind that the pet actually can't enter. A lot of people get very concerned about the cats getting into the cot and that's a valid concern, they don't go in there to suffocate babies, they go in there because it's warm. And I think there was one horrible case where I think that that actually did happen and that is why people are so worried. They go where it's warm and ideally you would keep your cat obviously away from the cot area. The other big thing is, obviously, when you're bringing home babies there is supervision all the time, so never ever think for one minute that it's okay to leave your pets alone with your baby.

Tiffany: Yeah. And I think that's a really important one. I mean, I grew up with animals around me, my parents didn't have any pets when I was born but I grew up with a lot of animals around. And I know that whenever we had young people round to our house, like toddlers or little kids, we had to be really aware that our dogs weren't used to the young kids. So I guess it's the same in all cases, whether it be a baby or a young child, you just don't know how animals are going to maybe react to something that's very different that they haven't experienced before as well.

Katrina: Yes. And there's several things you can do in advance and there's a lot of people that have new puppies through the COVID period that may now be adolescents, there's still people getting puppies now because we're at home more. You can socialize those puppies and get your dog and pets used to some of the sounds that babies make because their crying is unique.

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Katrina: (cont...) And what was interesting when I had my own daughter, Charlotte, my dog was absolutely fine with the noises of babies crying and her crying in the night because he'd been exposed to that with our travels and our socializing. But the cat had never heard a baby cry and so the first time the cat heard the baby cry, you could see she was actually quite distressed by it and didn't know what it was.

But now it's really, really easy, you can go online, there's apps and you can download the sounds of babies crying, different sounds, and you can help to get your pet used to the sounds of that well in advance of bringing the baby home. You play them on a low volume first and you give your pet lots of treats and then you gradually increase the volume. It's the sudden changes that the pets don't like so everything you can do in advance is going to help your pet adjust a little better. You can also, when you've got the nursery set up, a month before, let the pets come in and sniff, sniff the powder, sniff the nappies, sniff the nursery and get used to it so it's not just a room that they're suddenly shut out of.

Tiffaney: Yeah, great tips there too. I think like you said, if they're uncertain of something and not sure then they're going to be more curious as well, I guess, or they're going to feel like that's the place that they want to go but they can't go and feel negative maybe about that space too, I guess, Katrina.

Katrina: Yes. It's common for people to want to put their dog outside when the baby is around, particularly if it's a boisterous dog and it jumps up and they want to feel that there's a calm environment in the house, but you need to teach your dog to be comfortable outside or else he's just going to go outside and want to come back inside. So I say to everyone that's got a new puppy right now that's having a baby or looking to have a baby, to make sure you teach it alone time, it's one of the most important things that anyone can teach a puppy or a dog. And when I say alone time, that's time in the house where you're not interacting with it, they are not following you from room to room and they have quiet time somewhere.

And if you train your puppy from the start to go into a playpen or crate train it or to be comfortable outside, it will make life so much easier for you long-term. There's one of the things that people often overlook when you walk your dog, when you don't have a pram, it's a very different experience to when you do have a pram.

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Katrina: (cont...) And it's so important if you are okay with looking a little bit silly for a while to go out with a pram with no baby in it and practice walking your dog alongside an empty pram, you will be surprised how difficult it actually is to walk safely with both dog and pram.

And what often happens, if people have a dog that pulls on the lead, they will find the dog pulls, the pram wobbles, everyone feels uncomfortable, so what happens then? The dog doesn't come out on the next walk. So work really hard and if you have a puppy right now, work really hard on that hill walking, getting the right harness, a no pull harness, and rewarding your dog for walking quietly and slowly beside you. It's a difficult thing for a dog because they're excited and they want to get to the park, but ideally you want to be able to walk. My dog was amazing with the pram, he would just trot along slowly beside me and I felt safe. But if you don't feel safe, you won't do it or you will do it and you could have a disaster of a time, so that's just another little tip to work on in advance.

Tiffany: Yeah, no, that's great. Well, actually we had a Great Dane for a while when I had my kids, my young ones, and he didn't come on walks very often because he was very strong and I just found it quite challenging and he actually had issues with his hips anyway. So we couldn't take him for long walks, he had hip dysplasia so it was really challenging to bring him out for walks anyway. But, yeah, with such a big dog, it would have definitely been something I would've had to have practiced beforehand, I think, or usually it would be my husband coming with me to take him for the walk and I would do the pram bit. But yeah, of course, it makes so much sense Katrina, thanks for sharing that. So I guess on the day, the big introduction, what are some of the key steps to consider there because I think that's what people are really going to want to know too. What are some of the things I really need to think about on that day of introduction?

Katrina: If you can get someone to help you, that's great because it's so much easier, if someone else can hold the baby for you and you can be rewarding your pet. Ideally get something taken home from the hospital with the baby's scent on it so the pet can smell the baby's scent and be familiar with that in advance. But you don't want to make a huge deal of it, ideally if you're holding the baby, so I'm holding the baby, sorry, you pass the baby to somebody else to hold but you then reward your dog with lots of treats just for being in the same room as the baby. So give the pet attention, if the baby is crying that's fine, but you play a game, you don't make a really big fuss and you keep it short and sweet.

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Katrina: (cont...) Then ideally give you a dog, and we're talking mainly dogs here because cats will tend to come and go more as they please whereas with the dog you can arrange that introduction a whole lot more, cats don't force it, they will come eventually.

Ask your dog to go and lie down on their bed or go to the mat or wherever you've been teaching them to go, but give them something really rewarding. So their favorite chew toy, or a corn toy stuffed with food, or pop them out and if you want to pop them out, make sure you give them their dinner, so the whole thing is you want them to associate the baby with a good thing. And when I had Charlotte, I mean, I knew Toby would be okay because he was a very socialized dog and had been around babies but what I did every single time, my partner would walk in the room with her, I would give him a treat. So he started very quickly to think there's the baby, where's my treat and that works really well. So he'd look at me and I would have a little treat pouch on or a little jar of treats in the living room, wherever I go, and he'd come up near the baby, I'd ask him to sit to get the treat.

Tiffany: That sounds great. And I think, like you said there, if they know they're going to get a reward then why wouldn't they do a good job next time when they are around the baby or, like you said, that association with positive behavior. It's like when you're dealing with children, isn't it? You want to enforce that good behavior so it makes so much sense. If your animal, particularly dogs I guess, have problem behaviors, I guess, how can you kind of weed those out before you do bring your baby home or if they do occur once you bring your baby home, what are some ways to deal with those?

Katrina: The big one that is obviously a huge concern for everyone is if your pet has aggressive behaviors towards babies or children. That's the one that scares everyone, that's the one that is very serious, and with that I say, we can't solve that problem in a podcast, it's a really serious issue, and you need to speak to a veterinary behaviors or an expert to help you in advance of the baby coming home. So if you have a dog that guards it's food bowl, and you're not comfortable to go near the food bowl, well, then you have to think, what are you going to do when your baby is a toddler if you have a dog that you're scared to go to the food bowl.

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Katrina: (cont...) You have to be sensible and for some reason, a lot of people, you don't want to be truthful to yourself sometimes but if you think that that's a problem, if you think that your dog growls at the baby, your dog is getting possessive of you and not wanting the baby, you can generally tell, and if they're pushing for attention and if you ask them to lay down on their bed and they're not, there's nothing wrong with seeking professional help and the sooner that you seek it the better it's going to be. So the serious issues absolutely, it's for your peace of mind and for the safety of the baby.

And in the back of your head I will forever remember this phrase which I got from the Victorian Government when I did a program. I worked on a program with them called We Are Family, supervise or separate, supervise is observing in the back of your head and go, where's the dog? I'm with the dog, the dog is here, I know where it is, where's my baby? So always just think about that. So that's the serious problem behavior. A lot of the other problem behaviors such as jumping up or barking, a lot of those can be managed with the right training and again, speaking to an expert to give you a plan and program. Don't underestimate the value of exercise for pets to solve a lot of these behaviors because a lot of behaviors can come from boredom and when you've got a new baby, you may not be out exercising as much as normal. So if you can get someone to help you to take the dog out, that's a great thing as well.

Tiffany: Yeah. And I think, like you said, it's about really just planning ahead and thinking about how they're feeling, how they're behaving. Are there certain signs, though, to look out for when you're wanting to know how your pet is feeling? Because I guess sometimes it can just become the norm, it's what you accept, but are there certain signs to look for, particularly with dogs? I guess they're sometimes easier to read maybe than a cat.

Katrina: Pets can also get very stressed by the presence of a baby because they like their routine and so sometimes you will see behavior changes that might be going to the toilet in the wrong place in the house, dogs might start weeing on your bed and cats as well. Cats might start inappropriate urination in the house, they might start meowing more or barking more. You generally know your pet quite well and you'll see these changes in behavior that could indicate stress.

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Katrina: (cont...) It's important to not just put it all down to stress and the change of what's happening in the house in case there's a medical issue going on, but sometimes they're just so finely tuned into the life that they had that anything can cause an upheaval.

So keeping them calm, particularly cats, giving them a safe space to go to, a place or a room in the house where they feel comfortable, that's always quiet, where they can have their litter box and a big tall climbing tree to climb up because that gives cat security, that can really help, not thrusting them into the sort of noise and mayhem that comes with the baby but letting them come at their own time.

Tiffany: Yeah. So I guess Katrina, if animals are feeling left out what are some of the things that you can do to handle that? Because, like you said, there are certain signs that they might portray when they're in the house, whether it be with the baby or just in general with change happening, what are some of the ways in which we can handle them feeling left out? What are some of the things that we can do to make them feel a part of things still?

Katrina: Give them lots of things to do. And that can be with dogs using chew toys, using enrichment toys like puzzle toys where they have to work to get the food out, things that are going to occupy their brain will help tie them out as well. It's very difficult and I underestimated how time consuming a baby is, you really don't understand it till you live it, right? So when you get to the end of the day, I've achieved nothing all day. So it's hard to put that extra thing in for the pets but if you can find them things to do, with cats giving them an enriched environment with cat grass to chew on, scratching post, climbing tree, but again, giving them their sort of privacy and safety and trying to get the dogs out and about for exercise and training is very helpful.

Tiffany: Yeah. That quality time, I guess, and quality things for them to think about doing for themselves, like you said, keeping them occupied. Yeah. Again, it reminds me of my toddlers and then when I did have animals what I would do too, because I did have animals when I had young kids as well. So it was about trying to make that special time with them or giving them little things that they could do, whether it be with them being indoors or outdoors and just trying to have that bit of time with them each day as well that I could fit in. But like you said, it's so hard with a new baby to fit anything else in, it's hardest to get the basics done, right?

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Katrina: It's really hard and it's easy to feel guilty because you feel so bad because you think, oh my gosh, I was spending all this time with my dog before and now the time is reduced. And I've seen all these people bringing in new puppies over this past year and it continues as this massive boom, but the young dog is definitely harder to manage than the older pet. So I was lucky in my own experience because Toby was I think 10 when I had Charlotte so his energy levels were very different to the Border Collie that I have now. So I didn't feel as bad that he's exercise had reduced a little bit but I don't really recommend bringing in a new puppy. A lot of people want the puppy to grow up with the baby, I just think it's better to wait till you've got your head space back.

Tiffany: Yeah. Well, you're raising two babies effectively then, aren't you? You're trying to train your puppy at the same time as trying to work out being a parent and I guess working out how to be a mother to this baby and babies take so much time and energy so that makes perfect sense. So we've spoken a little bit about the difference between cats and dogs but maybe if we delve into cats a little bit. Because as you mentioned there, that whole smothering of the baby thing where people are worried about the cat climbing into the cot and getting smothered, I think that might be a really great sort of thing to cover now. So just going into how to manage cats around babies, I think, might be great to just delve into a bit more, if you feel comfortable with that.

Katrina: Yeah. So cats are a little bit different and then we're generally warm and snugly and as I mentioned, they usually will only head to the cot because it's warm. So you can block the access or you can obviously make sure you know where your cat is at all times, I blocked the access, I put a baby gate up so that I didn't have to worry about my cat getting in there. And then I changed my tact, took the baby gate off because it was driving me mad in the night and I was fortunate enough to have a spare bedroom and I would put the cat into that bedroom at night. So I just set her up in there with a litter box and whatever she needed and she would go in there at night so I would know there was no way she could go into the baby's room and that gave me peace of mind and the rest of the time I was supervising.

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Katrina: (cont...) Another thing with cats just to think about is, they're not out to smother your baby at all, what they can do though, they have very sharp claws and it's important to clip them, you can just clip them down or get your vet to keep the claws trimmed down every couple of months just in case you're petting the cat and the baby is around, that's another thing. But cats tend to do things a lot more on their own terms, my cat was very happy to just sit next to us on the couch, there was no fuss, some cats will disappear and hide under the bed, so it's up to the individual cat.

Tiffany: Yeah. So when you mentioned bringing a blanket home or something like that, and introducing them to the smells, is that really important or more important for cats than you say it would be for dogs or is it virtually the same thing?

Katrina: It's good for both animals to smell something in advance of coming home and also to give them the opportunity because cats are curious and if there's something new to jump up into, guarantee that they will do that. So jumping up onto the change table they'll do, jumping into the cot they'll do, like my cat right now, jumping onto all my jigsaw puzzles, they'll jump onto anything you don't want them to jump onto, and if you let them do that in advance, the curiosity will tend to go away.

Tiffany: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense too. And I guess with that introduction to the baby, like you said, it's a bit different with dogs to cats in the sense that, like you said, cats are going to do things on their own terms, aren't they? So they're not necessarily going to just be there when you bring the baby home and that they might hide away and you might not see them for a little while. So if they do come up to the baby first thing, whenever it might be, like you said, the trimming of the claws and those such things, are they the main things to look for? Are there some other things you want to kind of talk about too?

Katrina: Trim their claws well in advance before bringing the baby home. So again, you don't want the cat to associate the baby with anything negative. Maybe if you have a cat that loves food, my cat loves food and loves food treats, so I would do the same thing, he's as motivated as a lot of dogs by food, so you can certainly have the baby there and then just feed them dinner. And, again, he's not really fussed by noise but some cats don't like that change and are very sensitive and very timid.

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Katrina: (cont...) And if they want to hide in a room for a while, that's fine, you can put the litter box in there and feed them in there for a while but give them the option to come out. Pets really love climbing, not the scratching post, but the actual climbing trees where they've got a perch on the top, that helps cats to feel secure. They love to sit on their throne and watch the world below them go by and it gives them that feeling of confidence, security. So I recommend that everyone buys one of those climbing trees, unfortunately, they're not always very attractive but they help keep your cat, I guess, content.

Tiffany: Yeah, no, that's great. So are there some things in the long run to keep an eye on, I guess, like you mentioned, as the baby grows and as the animal gets more used to things? Are there some things we can do to ensure they're both happy as time goes on? Is there anything that you wanted to sort of touch on there?

Katrina: Think the most important thing as the babies get a little bit older is to really remember that supervise or separate because once a baby is mobile, they may easily crawl over to the sleeping dog, your sleeping dog, and startle it and wake it up and the dog might react in a way they normally wouldn't because they were in a deep sleep, or they might crawl over towards the dog's food bowl or take the dog's favorite toy, or the dog just might start thinking, huh, here's a game on and it can be really dangerous. So I personally found that toddler period, and from the moment Charlotte became mobile, three to probably four, quite challenging because you really did have to watch very closely. And kids don't... And they don't learn until they're probably eight or older, they really don't understand pets and pet behavior and you can say to a child, an older child that, what was it? Seven or eight, be gentle, but they don't really understand. So you've got to assume that the baby could do things to any of your pets that the pet doesn't necessarily like or understand.

Tiffany: That's something we need to be mindful of is that we just don't know how an animal is going to react in situations. So, like you said, that supervision all the time is really important, that supervision, or of course like you said, separation, I think that's a great takeaway. Are there any other takeaways you just wanted to go through before we finish up? Some things that you'd really like a first time parent who has a pet who's about to become a parent, are there some things that you'd really like to just, I guess, reiterate today before we finish up?

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Katrina: I think the take homes for me would be to make sure you have solid discussions with other people that are in the house and stick to the same rule so that you are setting up routine for your pet in advance with the expectations of how that pet is going to be managed around the baby so you're both on the same track. Obviously supervise or separate, have that in the back of your head at all times. Don't panic one bit, don't panic at all, you want to make the baby a positive thing for everyone in the household. And if you can remember this, make the baby a positive experience for your pet, that will get you through a lot because the pet will then think, okay, baby is around, nothing bad is happening to me. So I think they're probably my take home messages and yeah, just to be relaxed about it, not to be overly stressed because that stress will rub off on everybody.

Tiffany: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing your wealth of knowledge today Katrina, it's been so interesting. I've learned a lot so I know that hopefully all the listeners will have as well taken those tools and tips home just to, I guess, really feel positive with knowing now, okay, these are the steps involved with introducing my baby to my pet while ensuring that harmonious household. So thank you so much for your time today again, Katrina.

Katrina: It's a pleasure and I'm wishing everyone all the best because there's nothing better than a family unit with children and pets, it warms my heart.

Tiffany: Yeah, it really does. And as I said, I grew up with pets, so it's really lovely to really think about the memories I have with my animals growing up and those great bonds that you build. And it teaches children so many things when they're young to learn about care and nurture and being respectful and all those sorts of things. So I think there's just so many amazing things that rub off when having pets around, I'm sure you'd agree.

Katrina: Oh, there certainly is, they do, they are invaluable teachers to children, but obviously you want it to be done safely and properly from the very start.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. I hope you've enjoyed listening today. If you'd like to learn more about your pets health, behavior, or training tips, jump on and check out Dr. Katrina's Instagram or Facebook, [@drkatrina](#).