



Puppy love

WORDS: JUDITH HURRELL

How owning a dog can bring joy to all the family

It's hard to believe that Ben, a confident new father and dog owner, was a shy child. "Oh, I was a real mummy's boy. Family holidays were tenting – having to come out from behind my mum's legs to meet distant cousins. But it was easy to break the ice when I had my doggy. Wrestle with me, chasing his tail and making everyone laugh. There's no denying the psychological benefits of having a family dog. As well as developing friendships, research suggests dogs teach children to nurture others, develop responsibility and maintain routine. Studies link pet ownership with high self-esteem, greater cognitive development and less shyness.

Children with pets score higher on empathy and social scores than non-pet owners. For Lisa Tardif, who volunteers with her Rhodesian Ridgeback therapy dog at The Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, the benefits are physical too. "When one patient saw the 95 pound Rhodesian Ridgeback walk into the room, he pulled his arm out of the strap on his walker and began petting her. They'd been trying for days to get the patient to remove his hands from the straps." Research confirms the health benefits, showing children with pets have stronger immune systems and are absent from school less than non-pet owners. With so many advantages, no wonder one in

five UK households owns a pet – 23% of them dogs, but it's not all wagging tails. "I'm called in when a dog is on its 'last chance' with the family," says Hanna Grice, dog behavior and owner of Walk The Dog (www.walk-the-dog.net). Children are more at risk of being bitten by dogs than adults; their movements are fast and erratic which can provoke the dog's chasing instinct. Children also have larger eyes than adults and are closer to a dog's eye level and the floor where dogs eat and sleep. Luckily, Hanna has lots of baby proofing tips. It's all about building positive associations for your dog before the baby arrives.

- Allow the dog to explore baby products. If you have a friend bring home the newborn's blanket and reward the dog as he sniffs it.
- Buy a sound effect CD with the sound of babies crying – play this at a low level to acclimatise your dog, treating him at the same time. Gradually increase the volume if he shows no signs of stress.
- Buy a 30cm-disk and act as you would with a real baby, holding your dog as you do so. Your dog will begin to associate the baby with good things.
- When it comes to the big

day, it's a case of putting these experiences into practice.

- When you come home from hospital, allow a family member to carry your baby while you greet the dog. Then sit down with the baby and introduce your dog. Stay calm, keeping your body relaxed, and reward your dog for

good behaviour. You can always keep the dog on a lead in case he gets excited.

"No matter how well-trained your dog," cautions Hanna, "from the time you bring your baby home until your child is six to eight years of age, he or she should never be left unsupervised with any dog. But don't worry with careful management, children and dogs can live in harmony. There's nothing better than little ones playing with their four-legged friend and watching them growing up together."

Never mind man's best friend, soon your dog will be baby's best friend too.

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