

When dog and baby don't mix



Julia, Griffen and Braddock DiMasi with Finn the dog and mom, Nicole.

BY VERA LAWLOR

First there was Bill and Nicole DiMasi and their dog, Finn, a Labrador-collie mix. Then, almost three years later, along came triplets Julia, Griffen and Braddock and life changed dramatically. The North Jersey couple worked with a trainer to help prepare Finn for the arrival of the babies, including bringing home their blankets so that he could get used to the smell. Once the infants were home, they made sure that Finn knew his boundaries around the babies.

"Finn was very interested in the babies when we first brought them home and always wanted to be around them. He would get upset and whine when the babies cried," says Bill DiMasi.

With three babies to care for, life in the DiMasi household became hectic and, of course, Finn's routine

had to change, too. On one snowy winter day Nicole DiMasi wrote in her blog about life with the triplets that "... poor Finn just wants to go out and play ... he just lies in his bed in front of the slider and sighs every once in a while. It breaks my heart because he didn't sign up for any of this ... He has even helped me calm the babies down lately. We've had a few moments when everybody was screaming and he chooses a baby, goes over to them and lays his head on their legs trying to calm them down. It even worked for a few minutes until I could get there."

But despite these helpful moments it was obvious to the couple that Finn was not happy in his new environment. He first became aggressive with other dogs and then began snapping at guests. A trainer came in to work on the issues, but things didn't improve. Eventually the couple decided that they had no choice

but to surrender Finn back to the shelter where they had adopted him.

"We had several incidents with Finn biting/nipping in anger or fear at me, my wife, several friends and finally at our son, Griffen. He had never broken any skin so for a while we wrote it off, but in the end we believed that we were endangering our children if we continued to keep Finn in the house," says Bill DiMasi. "It was an excruciating decision. Finn was our first baby and we adored him. We cried for days, but we knew we were doing the right thing for our children and for Finn."

While shelter and rescue groups too often see dogs abandoned by families just because a new baby comes into the house, there are cases like that of the DiMasi family, where the best possible solution for all concerned is to find the dog a new home.

"This is one of the most difficult things for dog owners. They adore

their dog and feel like they are caught between a rock and a hard place," says Pia Silvani, director of training and behavior at St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center in Madison and author of *Raising Puppies and Kids Together: A Parent's Guide*.

"They feel they are deceiving the dog, especially when the dog has been there for them for many years. Yet, how can one pick a dog over a child when the child is in danger of severe injury? It is an awful place for these parents to be in, when times should be so happy."

While Silvani cannot offer parents any guarantees that dogs turned into shelters won't be euthanized – not all shelters operate as no-kill – the trainer said that dogs adopted out to another good home will fare well.

"Think about how many people a dog can become attached to in a family – parents, grandparents, family members, friends. Yes, it may take a

few months, but dogs will bond with good people who care and love them.”

Why do some dogs adjust to new babies while others feel stressed?

“We never know what is going on in the brain of any living being,” says

Silvani, former vice president of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers and Board Advisor to the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters. “It’s not jealousy – dogs do not exhibit jealousy – that’s a human emotion.

It’s not a pack issue either since dogs do not see their social group as a pack.”

What has happened, Silvani says, is that the dog’s immediate social group was once stable and now there is an intruder. Typically, she explains, dogs who have difficulty adjusting to babies have not been properly socialized with children and are now forced to live with them.

“They do not understand the body language of a child and feel threatened. They are looking to their leader, the parent, for help, but the parent is paying attention to the intruder and not giving the dog what it needs,” says Silvani.

What are those needs? That, the trainer says, depends on the dog.

Deciding whether or not to part with a dog must to be evaluated on a case by case basis, says Silvani.

“Obviously, if a dog goes out of its way to attack a child, then that is a no brainer. The child’s presence is a

threat, not the child’s actions,” she says. “I recently had a case where the mother was far too anxious and the dog (who was stressed) and the child were both feeding off her.”

Although the dog hadn’t bitten anyone, Silvani recommended giving him up because the dog was not happy in his current environment.

“The questions I ask are: Can we keep the child safe? Is everyone happy, including the dog? What is the quality of life like?” says Silvani.

As for what became of Finn?

“We were overjoyed to hear that he found a family who had a female dog that he loved,” says Bill DiMasi. “They are also big hikers and have a large fenced-in back yard. That made us smile because we have a small, two bedroom town home with no real yard.”

Vera Lawlor is The Parent Paper’s pet columnist. You can contact Vera at parentpaper@northjersey.com.

Preparing pet for baby

Some steps families can take to help a dog feel more comfortable with a new baby in the home:

- Before the baby comes home, the parents should get an infant doll that cries and crawls to test it on the dog. The dog will either feel good about what he sees or not.
- Well before the new baby arrives home, families should create a schedule for the dog that can be maintained once the infant is home.
- Family members should pay attention to the dog even when the baby is awake. This will help the dog have a positive association with the baby.
- Give the dog a break. Send the dog to day care, get a pet sitter, exercise the dog and try to keep things as normal as possible.
- Safety gates are critical.

Source: Pia Silvani, Director of Training and Behavior at St. Hubert’s Animal Welfare Center in Madison and author of Raising Puppies and Kids Together: A Parent’s Guide.



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