

# Top Dog *Rhea Dodd promotes household harmony with pets*

It's a common family scenario in Colorado: Two parents adopt a dog as their first "baby," then later decide to add a human baby to the fold. Apart from keeping Fido's leash and baby's stroller from becoming a swivel-wheeled, tangled mess, many parents soon discover the new household arrangement to be a challenge.

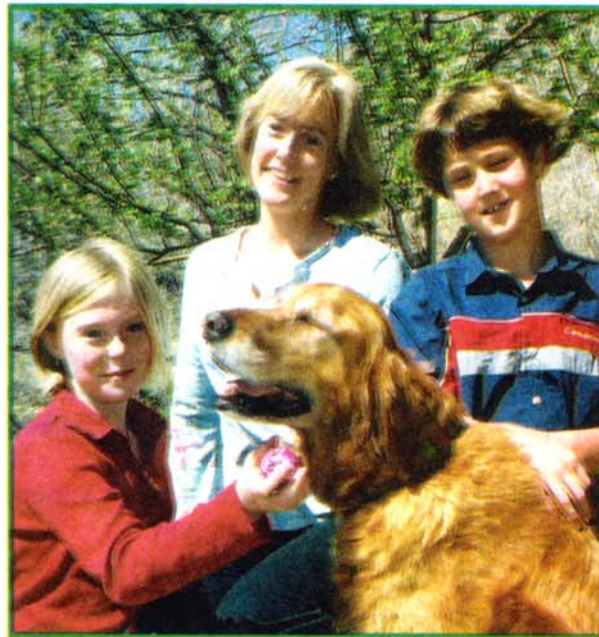
"It's a huge issue," notes Rhea Dodd, a veterinarian and animal behavior consultant in Littleton, "and too many times people call after the fact."

Fortunately for pet parents in Colorado, resources for help are abundant. A 2003 study by the Purina Pet Institute named Denver as the "Pet Healthiest City" nationwide, based on superior care, services and legislation for pets' health and well being.

Though she prefers to work proactively with her clients and their pets in preparing for the arrival of a new baby in the household, teaching an old dog new tricks isn't out of the question for Dodd. Based on positive-reinforcement training, Dodd has worked successfully with dogs from all walks of life.

Helping dogs get used to the new routine of an infant in the home is especially important, explains Dodd. "We do things like using baby dolls to practice diapering, and playing CDs of baby sounds to get the dog used to them." These activities are associated with lots of treats and praise so that the dog learns to associate a crying or crawling baby (you can even practice with a "crawling" baby doll, says Dodd) with good things. "Otherwise, resentment can build up," explains Dodd, who adds that parents should never leave a baby unsupervised with a dog.

Whether it's introducing baby or another cat or dog, Dodd advises using "time outs – just like with kids" to encourage household harmony. "It certainly becomes more complicated, the more kids and pets you have," admits the 44-year-old mother of two 9-year-old twin daughters, plus a nearly 10-year-old golden retriever, 4-year-old



**Veterinarian Rhea Dodd (center) helps parents balance pet-parenting with child-parenting.**

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and 11-month-old border collies, two cats and a hermit crab.

"To resolve any problems, you need to be aware of how the animals relate together," explains Dodd, who studied the natural behavior of animals as part of her master's program at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

For parents, watching a child grow up can be painfully sweet; for pet owners, witnessing a beloved pet's aging process can be equally difficult. It's another scenario the "gentle vet" is familiar with: "My greatest joy as a veterinarian is to keep pets happily within their family circle for as long as possible," says Dodd, who offers a holistic approach to pain relief through progressive therapy for both cats and dogs. In addition to her doctorate in veterinary medicine from Colorado State University, Dodd received certification from the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society.

It's one reason Dodd began offering "puppy kindergarten" classes about two years ago. "I saw so many aggressive dogs and behavior problems that could have been preventable if people

started out right, with proper house rules and reinforcing behaviors they want to see," says Dodd in her usual calm, confident manner – the same tone you might hear a practiced parent using upon gently disciplining a child. "Mellow," she intones soothingly, stroking the back of an overly excited puppy-kindergarten student, and then massaging its ears coaxingly.

"It's important for kids to work with the family dog along with parental participation," adds Dodd. "But the parents need to remember that ultimately they are the leaders in the household. Being a competent pet parent is very similar to being a competent parent."

One reason for this is the unpredictability of children, explains Dodd. "Even my own children, who have been exposed to a lot of animals and training, will still do random things like getting in our dog's face or taking a rawhide away from them – which can be a potentially reactive situation for a dog."

In between house calls to visit with clients ranging from Colorado Springs to Longmont, Dodd finds time to practice agility and sheep herding with her adult border collie, or head out to open space with her other dogs and family. A love for Colorado's "natural beauty" is what first attracted Dodd to the state during a high school ski trip; when the opportunity arose for her to return years later as an Outward Bound instructor, Dodd didn't hesitate to pursue it.

Indeed, instruction seems to come naturally for Dodd, who offers pro-bono community lectures several times a year; on Sept. 25 she will offer a behavioral workshop at the Denver Dumb Friends League on "helping pets thrive." A portion of the proceeds from the \$25 session for cats or dogs will go to the Metro Denver Shelter Alliance.

For family-pet questions, contact Rhea Dodd at 303-919-1504.

*Guen Sublette is calendar editor for Colorado Parent and mother of two young children as well as caretaker of a cat and a dog.*