

# natural awakenings

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## Tips for Stress-Free Pets This Holiday Season

by Chris Onthank

**T**he most wonderful time of the year can also be a very stressful time for your pets. The holidays highlight the importance of sharing your life with a well-trained and socialized pet that can adjust with ease to new environments. Most animals (particularly dogs and cats) like consistent structure in their environment. Dogs, and even cats, live in social groups like packs or families. They feel most comfortable and secure when the dynamics of the pack (humans included) stays the same. During the holidays is when family and friends tend to visit most. Children come home from college and bring a new dog they recently adopted, parents/in-laws move into the house or your sister comes to visit with her two toddlers. These changes to the pack dynamics can really be a problem and cause major stress for your pet.

Canine behavioral experts will receive many phone calls the day after Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years because of dogs biting a guest or family member. People can't find their cats because they have been hiding for days. If your dog/cat is not used to small kids and toddlers or is a bit leery of strangers, visiting dogs and new situations in the house, you may want to rethink how you are going to take care of these pets during the holidays. For dogs that like to sleep on couches, beds and chairs, you need to be very careful that small children and toddlers do not put their faces up to theirs. Many dog bites occur when dogs are elevated and children go to kiss them on the face or hug them. Don't let children play on the

dog's beds or in their crates. Watch your pets and put them in another room when they seem stressed and or have had enough of your houseguests. Be careful when alcohol is involved, people tend to not "read" animals correctly when they are under the influence. It is unfortunately fairly typical for a family member or houseguest to fancy themselves Cesar Milan at a party, attempt to train the family dog and get bitten.

When a friend or family member wants to bring their new dog along for the holidays, it is important to know how the home pet will react. In general, this is not a great idea. If your cat is not used to dogs or the visiting dog is not used to cats, it could prove to be a disaster for all involved. An example of this is a client whose cat was killed by her daughter's new dog when she brought it home from college. If your dog tends to be protective of your home and yard when they see another dog, you will need to be very careful when having another dog visit. If you have a guest who is insistent on bringing their dog, first take both dogs on a long walk together and then introduce them in a neutral area. If all seems well, then introduce them in your yard next and then proceed to inside. Be sure to separate both dogs during feeding time. Pick up all dog toys and bones, as this is how many fights begin. In general, having your friend's dog visit your home during a busy holiday event or trip should be discouraged.

An alternative idea is to bring your dog to a boarding or daycare facility during such times. Many people will bring their dogs to canine centers such as Dog Gone Smart when they have a holiday party or out of town guests. The dogs may either stay for the day or even spend the night. This allows your dogs to have fun, get exercise and takes some stress out of the event. You can enjoy the holidays concentrate on your house guests. Another option is to set some off-limit rooms where your dog and cats can stay on their own during the party. Put a sign on the door asking guests to please keep out. If you can lock the door, so much the better. For cats, this can work very well but it may prove to be a problem for dogs if they can hear you and start to bark, scratch and whine. Crating your pet in a separate room may also work but remember to leave them food and water and to let them out to relieve themselves. If you sequester your cats, don't forget to also move their kitty litter box!

With a little pre-planning and thought about the whole family's needs, your pets can be stress free and everyone can better enjoy the holiday season.

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