



## TIPS FOR INTEGRATING CHILDREN WITH DOGS

Nearly one half of all households in the U.S. own a dog, and for many, the animal is part of the family. Children are naturally drawn to dogs, and many dogs seem to genuinely enjoy interacting with kids. Raising children with pets provides many benefits. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, pets can:

- Teach empathy and compassion
- Provide love, loyalty and affection
- Foster self-esteem
- Promote physical activity
- Teach responsibility
- Provide valuable life lessons
- Provide a connection to nature.

Despite the close kinship, more than 50,000 children ages 6 and under suffered a dog bite injury in 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Research shows young children are more likely to be bitten in the head and neck. Children can be very threatening to dogs. Due to a small child's stature, they are literally "in a dog's face". Children's sudden movements and startling high-pitched noises of are alarming and discomfoting to dogs. Very young children may think of a pet as a stuffed animal; begging to be squeezed, poked and chased. Babies and toddlers can't control their own aggressive impulses, nor do they have the cognitive skills to empathize with another animal's fear or discomfort. By school-age, children learn empathy, but they still may have trouble interpreting an animal's body language. They may not recognize that a dog's growl or stiffened posture means "back off!"

While certain dogs may be more tolerant of rambunctious kids than others, experts note that regardless of a pet's breed or disposition, any dog can bite. From the smallest to the largest, even the most friendly, cut and easygoing dogs might bite if provoked. You can help protect children from dog bites by discussing with them the appropriate way to behave around dogs. Included below are some basic tips to help children and pet owners.

### Safety Tips for Children

- The number one precaution for kids and dogs is to **supervise at all times**. Author and trainer Brian Kilcommons sums it up best when he says that "leaving a dog alone with a child is like leaving two toddlers in the same room, one with a pair of scissors." Sooner or later something can and will go wrong ("How to Introduce Dogs and Children").
- Don't fall prey to the old-school mantra that "a child can do anything to my dog and she'll never react." Even the best dog in the world could lash out if hurt or startled.
- Teach your child how and when to interact with a dog. Show her how to first offer her closed fist for the dog to sniff, then gently stroke the head and neck, avoiding more sensitive areas such as ears,

tail, feet and belly. Stroke your toddler's arm gently to show how good it feels. Explain that poking, squeezing or pulling at the dog isn't OK. Quiet voices are a must as well.

- Teach your child never to put her face near a dog's face.
- Never touch the dog when she is eating, chewing or sleeping.
- Do not allow rough play. This only encourages aggression. Teach your child appropriate ways to play with your dog using safe toys. Teach the difference between teasing and playing.
- Model the proper behavior by treating your dog with and respect at all times. Never yell at your dog or use physical punishment. This can heighten a dog's fear and aggression, increasing the likelihood it might bite; plus, children may mimic this behavior, further putting themselves in harm's way with the dog.
- Teach your children that they must always ask permission before interacting with someone else's dog. Children should ignore dogs who are confined behind fences, left in a vehicle, crated, or tethered to a tree. Confinement can make dogs more territorial and reactive.
- Involve older children in caring for your dog. Seven- to eight-year-olds can replenish food and water bowls; ten-year-olds can help with grooming, practice basic commands, or engage in a game of fetch. Depending on the dog's size and leash manners, an older child can take the dog out for short walks. This is a great way for children to start learning responsibility for other living things ("How to Introduce Dogs and Children").

## Recommendations for Parents of Pets

- "A secure dog knows his place in the family. Remind your dog who's alpha. Step up the obedience training. Work on basic commands such as SIT, STAY and OFF. Teach your old dog new tricks! ("How to Introduce Dogs and Children").
- Put your dog in a SIT, STAY or DOWN before allowing your child to approach. This reminds your dog that she is subordinate. And remember, **always supervise!**" ("How to Introduce Dogs and Children").
- If you are welcoming a new baby or child in your home, help your dog adjust. If possible, gradually introduce the new child's personal belongings before they arrive. While your newborn is still in the hospital, consider bringing home a nursery blanket or onesie with the baby's scent. This will lessen the shock when the baby finally comes home ("How to Introduce Dogs and Children").
- "Socialize your dog! Well-socialized dogs make enjoyable, trustworthy companions. Undersocialized dogs may be a risk to their owners and others because they can become frightened by everyday things—which means they are more likely to become aggressive or bite. It's important for puppies to meet, greet and enjoy a variety of people, animals, places and things. Done properly, socializing helps puppies feel comfortable and friendly in various situations, rather than uncomfortable and potentially aggressive" ("Dog Bite Prevention").
- Err on the side of safety. Be aware of common triggers of aggression, including pain, injury or sickness, the approach of strangers or strange dogs, the approach of people in uniforms, costumes or unusual attire (especially hats), unexpected touching, unfamiliar places, crowds, and loud noises like thunder, wind, construction, fireworks and appliances. If possible, avoid exposing your dog to these

triggers. Work with a qualified behavior and training professional to help your dog become more comfortable with these and other situations (“Dog Bite Prevention”).

- Learn to interpret your dog’s body language enables you to recognize signs of discomfort during an interaction. Take heed of the following types of dog body language: Shrinking to the ground, lowering of her head, tail between her legs, avoiding eye contact, walking away and/or ‘freezing’ can indicate that she is anxious or fearful. Stiffening up, fur on her back and tail stand on end, staring, baring her teeth or growling are obvious aggressive signals (“Dog Bite Prevention”).
- Don’t aggressively punish your dog. Yelling or hitting them to correct misbehavior can heighten a dog’s fear and aggression, increasing the likelihood it might bite; plus, children may mimic this behavior, further putting themselves in harm’s way with the dog (Schroeder).
- Ensure your dog has regular veterinary checkups. Your veterinarian will make sure your dog is appropriately vaccinated and free of infections and parasites that could pose a risk to your family. Your vet can also diagnose and treat painful conditions such as dental disease, ear infections, and arthritis that could make your dog irritable.
- Separate a dog from a child if they show high arousal and/or aggressive tendencies towards the child and immediately seek professional help from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB) or a veterinary behaviorist or a qualified Certified Professional Dog Trainer.

Though it can sometimes be difficult to interpret a dog’s body language, increased vigilance by parents can make a big difference in guiding positive interactions between kids and pets. Consider checking out the following dog bite prevention programs: Family Paws Parent Education for families living with a dog and kids ages 0 to 3, and The Blue Dog, for families with kids 3 to 6 years (Schroeder).

In many cases, simply paying closer attention to interactions between kids and the family dog may be enough to ensure safety. Whatever the case, parents should not wait to take action to protect children; being proactive can also help preserve the treasured relationship the family has with their pet.

## References:

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