

Kids and Dogs

Dogs and children are often thought to be naturals together. We see dogs in Disney movies being loving and loyal to their young charges, often times saving them from disaster. But, that's the movies! All those canines are highly trained actors that took a great deal of time to develop certain skills. The real truth be known, the most bitten member of American society are children under the age of 12. More often than not, they are bitten by the family pet or by a familiar dog (such as Grandma's or their friend's animal). You can stack the cards in your favor so you have that wonderful family pet, but you need to understand that the success of your dog with your children depends on several factors.

ONE IS YOUR DOG'S GENETICS. These are unchangeable ingrained responses to the world surrounding them. There is nothing you can do to change them. Hopefully you have selected a breed whose temperament is suited to living in a family situation. Not all breeds of dogs are good with children, especially small children. Take the time to research the breed of dog you are interested in for your family situation. Within a selected breed there are individuals as well. Just because you bought a Golden Retriever does not mean that the particular puppy or adult you selected is going to live up to the famous "Good Family Pet Seal of Approval". Taking the time to select an appropriate individual for your family situation is one of the keys to having a successful "marriage" of kids to dog.

SECONDLY IS THE ANIMAL'S PAST EXPERIENCES WITH CHILDREN. If your dog has had only previous experiences with kids that were pleasurable, then chances are he will enjoy their company. But if he has had several unpleasant, painful, or frightening situations occur with children, then he probably is going to be apprehensive around them; possibly to the point of being aggressive.

THIRDLY, WELL-SOCIALIZED PETS TAKE STRESSFUL AND UNUSUAL SITUATIONS IN STRIDE. Households with kids are noisy, unpredictable, busy and therefore, stressful. Animals who have received lots of positive socialization at an early age will be much less fearful and less likely to react to family life.

LASTLY, and most importantly to the success of your dog getting along with your children, is your strict parental supervision and guidance for both your dog and your children.

Carry, a seven year old Labrador Retriever, had bitten 18 month old Jason in the shoulder. The little boy needed over 30 stitches and as he was being treated at the hospital, Carry was taken to be euthanized. When the veterinary technician was about to remove the body from the table, she noticed something in the dog's ear. It was a pencil stub that had penetrated Carry's ear drum.

Supervise your children at all times!

GUIDELINES FOR FAMILIES WITH DOGS

NEVER LEAVE ANY CHILD 12 AND UNDER UNATTENDED WITH ANY DOG OR PUPPY. Strict supervision is a must. Every animal, even the so-called "fool proof" ones, have their limits. **EVERY DOG BITES** under the right circumstances so keep supervision a strict rule in your household.



CHILDREN, JUST LIKE PUPPIES, NEED TO LEARN THE RULES. Children should be taught to pet softly, stay away from food dishes, toys and bones, and not to startle the pet when it is sleeping. All of these things can and should be done with the pet, but only when you, the adult, are there to supervise AND you have first trained your pet to enjoy and tolerate all of the above (using positive methods).

BABIES & TODDLERS SHOULD ALWAYS BE KEPT HIGHER THAN THE DOG. Dogs see the world in a hierarchy. You are either a leader or a littermate. The smaller you are (meaning babies and small kids) the more likely you must be a littermate. Littermates get bossed around by being jumped on, pushed over, growled at, snapped at, and the final order, being bitten. Keep your small children up off the floor when the dog is in the same room.

AVOID TUG OF WAR, WRESTLING, EAR PULLING, PONY RIDING, TOY HITTING, FUR GRABBING, CHASING AND ANY ROUGH PLAY. All these activities teach your dog or puppy to be rough with humans and to grab and bite. That's exactly what you are trying to avoid (the biting part). Do not allow ANY family member, including adults, to engage in any rough play with your dog. Your family pet will attempt to play those rough games with your children and the results will not be harmonious. The basic rule of thumb is to never train your puppy or dog to do anything with you that you would not want him to do with a two-year-old toddler.

PLAY SUPERVISED GAMES THAT FOSTER COOPERATION AND CONTROL. These include games such as fetch, blowing bubbles, find it (hide a toy and have your dog find it), hide-and-peek (with your dog finding the kids for a treat or toy), kicking a soccer ball around or learning fun tricks. Avoid any game that gets your dog or puppy overly excited. If your dog is very high energy, have an adult exercise the canine first through jogging or biking or a hard game of fetch before he interacts with your children. If your dog should become too excited during play, then end the game immediately and try again later when your dog (and perhaps your children) are calmer.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN THE POSSUM STANCE. Children are small, move erratically, yell

and generally act crazy. Most dogs either would like to chase them or become very fearful of them. To a dog, a child running away is a great invitation to give chase, perhaps nipping and biting them. Teach your children that if the dog is chasing them, (perhaps barking, growling or nipping), to immediately stand still. Arms should be folded across their chest or over their face. Voices should become soft or completely quiet. Your child suddenly becomes a lot less interesting to your dog. He will then calm down and go off to do something else within a matter of moments.

GIVE YOUR DOG OR PUPPY A PLACE TO RETREAT TO WHEN HE HAS HAD ENOUGH OR YOU CANNOT PROVIDE SUPERVISION. Just like you, your dog will need some daily time off away from the children. Use an indoor crate that is off limits to the children or baby gate your dog into a safe room such as a kitchen or bedroom.

GIVE YOUR DOG HIS OWN BED, ON THE FLOOR AND OUT OF YOUR CHILD'S ROOM. Letting your dog or puppy sleep with your child is not only unsanitary (dogs can carry a number of external and internal parasites) but also relays a message to the dog that your child is a littermate. Littermates sleep together. If your child insists on having the canine in his room, crate train your pet and put the crate in your child's room for sleeping.

TRY TO PAIR ONLY PLEASURABLE THINGS WITH YOUR CHILDREN. If your dog or puppy is constantly being yelled at, spanked, or isolated outdoors whenever there are kids around, this builds a negative association. Your dog should be doing fun stuff with your kids, even if it is limited to feeding a few treats at first.

INVOLVE YOUR CHILD IN YOUR DOG'S CARE. Have your child help you feed your dog (he can tell the dog sit before you put the bowl down), brush (as you hold the collar and feed a few treats) and walk (attach two leashes to your dog so your child holds one but you have the main leash for control and safety.) Even just the presence of your child in the same room while your dog is receiving his favorite things or activities can help build a positive association to children.

TAKE A FORMAL TRAINING CLASS WITH YOUR DOG OR PUPPY. This teaches you how to communicate and understand your dog better.

Must teach cues are "come", "off", "sit", "down", "drop it", "stay" and "wait". Adults should initially teach all cues, then have the children practice them under supervision. Please call our Free Dog Training Information and Referral Helpline at (408)727-3383, extension 759 for humane dog training referrals.

WATCH FOR SIGNS OF TROUBLE. This includes your dog guarding food, toys, bones or resting places. Guarding starts with a simple freezing up of the body whenever the child comes too close and can quickly progress to growling, snapping, or biting if not addressed immediately.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO REPORT TO YOU WHENEVER THEY HEAR THE DOG GROWLING AND IT IS CLEARLY NOT DURING PLAY. The growl is a warning that your pet is not OK with the immediate situation at hand. Unless your child understands to back away immediately, they could be bitten. The only time you should not worry about your dog growling is when he is clearly playing. (See the body language handout for clarification on body language that is playful.) If you are hearing growling **at any time** other than in play, consult a professional immediately. Aggression problems unless addressed immediately, tend to get worse.

DO NOT HIT, SLAP, YELL, CHOKE, SHAKE OR USE A SHOCK COLLAR ON YOUR DOG FOR MISBEHAVIOR OR FOR AGGRESSION. These methods are unsuitable and can be very dangerous. These methods also show your children how you resolve problems and they may start to mimic them, putting themselves in grave danger. Consult a professional at once if it involves aggression and keep the dog isolated from your children until the problem has been dealt with quickly in a humane, safe way.

NOTICE GOOD BEHAVIOR. *This cannot be emphasized enough.* When your dog is being calm, playing with his own toys, or is being very gentle with your children, recognize it and reward it with ample praise and food treats.

DON'T GIVE YOUR DOG TOYS THAT RESEMBLE YOUR CHILDREN'S TOYS OR CLOTHING. Stay away from fabric stuffed dog toys that resemble your child's stuffed animals. Don't give your dog an old shoe or towel to chew

on and then expect him to know the difference between his stuff and your stuff. Give your dog Nylabones, Kongs or Buster Cubes.

AVOID GIVING YOUR DOG ITEMS THAT HE MAY PROTECT. Items such as rawhide, pig's ears, smoked bones or real bones may be much too valuable to your dog. So much that he may feel he must protect them. Certainly train your dog to allow things to be removed from his mouth by trading higher value treats for the item. But that is just it, *you must train it first before your children attempt it.* Adults practice first to make sure there are absolutely NO problems, then children practice under strict supervision.

MAKE YOUR DOG PART OF YOUR FAMILY. *Bad behavior is never improved by isolating your dog outdoors.* Dogs are pack animals and need to be with their pack. They need to spend daily time with you! In most cases, isolation will actually increase your dog's behavior problems. If you are having specific behavior problems such as chewing, housetraining, digging, barking, or thievery, then consult a trainer for advice rather than keeping your dog outdoors.

RECOMMENDED READING

Your Dog And Your Baby

Silvia Hartmann-Kent, Dog House Publications, Third Edition, 1998.

Childproofing Your Dog

Brian Kilcommons, Warner Books, 1994.

If you have any questions, problems or concerns, please call the Humane Society Silicon Valley's FREE Animal Behavior Helpline at (408)727-3383, extension 753.