

Interactions between Children and Dogs

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Children and dogs are a natural, but because of a child's small size and unpredictable behavior there are several things every pet owner or parent should know about children and dogs. This article will help parents decide which dog is best for small children, as well as how to introduce a new dog to a family with children. The article will also discuss special health risks and common behavior problems, which can occur between dogs and children.

As a veterinarian and a parent of two small boys that share our home with a dog and two cats, I deal with the issues of children and pets on a regular basis. Children and dogs can be the best of friends if you follow a few of these simple guidelines and precautions.

Choosing the right dog at the right time

Not every dog is right for children and not every child is right for a dog. The vast majority of dog/child problems I encounter involve children under six years of age. If your children are under six you should invest a great deal of time and thought before [choosing a new dog](#). Large dogs that have been bred as guard dogs or have a history of being aggressive or biting should be avoided. Large, high-energy dogs that can knock children over or dogs that bark excessively would not be good choices, as well.

Parents with small children are usually very busy; they often do not have the free time or desire to spend hours grooming or walking a high maintenance dog. Initially, puppies require almost as much time as a child does, so ask yourself if you are ready to bring a new puppy into a home that is already too busy. As a veterinarian, many of the problems I encounter occur because a dog was purchased because the dog would be 'good for the kids' or the children begged for one, but the parent did not really want a dog. If the parents are not one hundred percent committed to caring for and training the dog, then I usually discourage them from acquiring a dog, otherwise it is not fair to the people or the dog.

By the time children are seven or older some of them are ready to start to develop a rewarding relationship with a dog. If you want to see true happiness just look at the face of an 8-year-old when they hold their new lab puppy in their arms for the first time. Dogs can help teach a child responsibility, patience, empathy, and compassion, but remember, no young child is capable of properly training or completely caring for a dog, so the parent must always ultimately take full responsibility for the pet.



Bringing a dog into a family with children



After you have decided that a new dog or puppy is right for your family and have one picked out, take some time to get your house puppy-proofed and acquire the necessary puppy items before [bringing your puppy home](#).

When you bring the puppy home make sure it has several days to adjust before it is played with too much. Make up a set of house rules for the children concerning the new dog and post it on the refrigerator. Decide where the dog will sleep. I personally recommend that a dog sleeps on his own bed and not in the bed with children, as I have dealt with numerous behavioral and medical problems resulting from this practice.

Remember that your children will have to be trained on how to treat the dog, so plan on spending lots of time training the dog and the children. This pet will be with you for a long time so spend the time now to avoid unwanted behavior in the future. Educate yourself. Buy and read training books and consider enrolling your puppy in an obedience class. Well-trained dogs are a joy to be around and are a requirement if children are involved.

Bringing a new child into a family with pets

A common worry of new parents is how their dog will react when they bring a new baby into the house. Many parents often worry about potential health risks for their children, which we will discuss later in this article. Most dogs do fine when a baby is brought into the house. They are going to be curious and may feel neglected, but these feelings will soon pass. If the parents will take extra time out of each day both before and after the baby is born to play with, exercise, and groom the dog, the transition should go smoothly.

A newborn baby interacts very little with a dog, so most problems in the household start when the baby turns into a toddler and starts invading the dog's space. A toddler is not able to understand rules and should not be expected to 'leave the dog alone.' This is the time when the dog will be happier if he has his own space. Our dog spends a lot more of her time outside now that our children are both over two years old, and will probably do so until the youngest is at least four. Everyone, including the dog, is happier with this arrangement. Remember that when the baby comes home everyone will have less free time, except the dog. So make extra time for the dog and he should be fine.

The relationship between dogs and children

Dogs have a unique relationship with people. As the understanding of the 'pack' mentality becomes more prevalent, it

becomes easier to see why dogs act the way they do. Understanding and altering dog behavior revolves around understanding dog behavior and the importance of dominance and submission in the dog psyche. It is important to remember that in the dog's mind the family is a pack unit and everyone in that family has a certain 'position' in the pack. In most families, one or both of the parents are considered the pack leaders and the dog is subordinate to them. Now depending on the dog, this may be very obvious or it may not really matter much. But when small children are involved, it has been my experience that dogs almost always consider the children equal or lower in the pack hierarchy than they are, and this is where the problem arises.

Because the dog considers the child a subordinate, it may refuse to obey the child's commands or 'accidentally' bump into the child and knock her down. It may escalate to growling at the child when the child is near food or toys, or even baring his teeth and biting when the child approaches or tries to play with the dog. It is essential that the parent understands this hierarchical relationship and takes precautions to prevent problems from arising. Such behaviors are an indication that professional help, such as your veterinarian or an animal behaviorist, are needed.

Why dogs bite children, and how to prevent it

When dogs bite adults it is usually out of fear and perhaps out of aggression. When dogs bite children it may also be from fear or aggression, but I feel that many times it is what I call 'warning bite.' The warning bite is usually to the face or hand and while traumatic for the child, is often not serious in a medical nature.

While I consider any dog bite extremely serious it is important to distinguish between the nature of the bite to prevent problems in the future. When a dominant dog is unhappy with a subordinate dog he will use a series of body positions to signal that he is unhappy and the subordinate dog better stop what he is doing. If the subordinate dog still does not stop, then the dominant dog will growl and possibly bare his teeth. If the subordinate dog still refuses to obey, the dominant dog will snarl and quickly bite the subordinate dog. The bite is not intended to injure the subordinate dog, but is meant as a stern warning and punishment. This is very similar to what happens to children when they are bitten.

Unfortunately, children are not able to interpret the dog's language, nor is the dog capable of communicating in any other way. Therefore, almost all dog bites are a result of failure on the parents' part to recognize and prevent potential problem situations. This does not, however, completely take the blame away from the dog. Dogs are capable of learning to control their behavior and not bite, and older children can learn to 'leave the dog alone.' However, when a dog bite occurs, the blame should rest with the adults for failing to prevent it and the child and dog should not be punished for acting like children or dogs.

If a child is bitten and the skin is broken, the wound should be thoroughly cleaned and medical attention should be sought, if necessary. If there is any question as to the [rabies](#) vaccination status of the dog, contact the local county nurse for direction. The psychological effects of a dog bite are often much worse than the physical effects. If a child is afraid of dogs after the incident you need to address that problem as well. Slowly introducing the child back to dogs while the child is in a secure environment (being held) is one approach. However, do not underestimate the potential for the child to develop a long-term fear; seek professional help if your child is having trouble adjusting to being around dogs again.

Health concerns for parents of children with dogs



Dogs and people live happily together with a very small risk of infections being transmitted back and forth. However, there are a few special considerations with children. Obviously rabies and dog bites are concerns, and it goes without saying, that all dogs should be vaccinated for rabies, especially dogs that are around children. If you have a dog that does not have a valid rabies certificate of vaccination and it bites a child, be prepared for the very expensive health and legal consequences that will ensue. Your dog should also be current on all [recommended vaccines](#). Children can contract [roundworms](#) or [hookworms](#) from dog feces, so make sure your puppy and adult dog are [de-wormed](#) on a regular basis.

[Fleas and ticks](#) can travel from dogs to children, so make sure your dog is protected with a flea and tick preventative. The once-a-month topicals offer excellent protection and are safe if used according to directions. On my own dog, I apply a monthly topical agent at night, after the kids are in bed. I put ten to twelve small 'stripes' down my dog's back to speed absorption, and I try not to let the kids play with the dog the next day. Of course it is a good idea to always have your children wash their hands after playing with the dog.

[Allergies](#) affect many children, so keeping the dog out of the children's sleeping area is always a good idea if your child is prone to allergies.

As a final note in the health section, I want to remind parents that I personally recommend that a dog and small child are never left alone unattended. Even the oldest, sweetest most passive dog and the best-behaved child cannot completely be trusted alone. I have witnessed first hand many instances where a loving child or dog was injured when left unsupervised.

Simple solutions for common dog – children problems

The following is a list of some common dog – child problems that arise and a list of possible solutions. For a more detailed list of behavior problems and their solutions see our [Behavior and Training](#) section.

The dog barks and wakes up the sleeping child or baby.

Solutions: Use a bark training aid or an electronic anti-barking collar.

Move the dog outside or to the basement when the baby is sleeping.

Let the dog bark and the baby will get used to it and sleep through it.

The dog runs into the child by 'accident' and knocks them down.

Solutions: Recognize when the behavior usually happens (when the dog is excited about going for a walk) and have the dog go into a down and stay position.

Put the dog outside when the children are practicing their walking.

Teach the child to tell the dog to sit when the dog is getting too excited.

The dog steals the child's food or begs at the table.

Solutions: Move the dog out of the kitchen during mealtime.

Have a bag of special treats that are just for the dog and discourage feeding table food.

Work on obedience training.

The dog jumps up on children.



Solutions: Never allow jumping on anyone for any reason, ever.

Teach the child to raise their knee and turn their hip toward the dog when they jump.

Initiate puppy training at a very young age to prevent this behavior.

The dog growls or snaps at the children.

Solutions: Develop a zero tolerance for dog aggression and institute strict obedience training for the dog.

Counsel the child on their behavior.

Eliminate the source of conflict; move the food bowl, remove the toy, install a doggie door so the dog has a place where he can sleep or be left alone.

The child comes in contact with dog feces.

Solutions: Accompany the dog outside and clean up after him immediately.

Have the dog's toilet area in a different place than the play area.

Pay the child 25 cents as a reward for each 'pile' they report for clean up.

There is no greater relationship than that between a child and their dog. Follow some good common sense precautions and choose the right dog at the right time for your child. A child and a dog both require a huge investment of your time. If you devote the time to both, your rewards will be far greater than anything money could ever buy.