



*A non-profit that educates
and supports dog owners*

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CHILDREN AND DOGS

Children and dogs can make great companions for one another. Dogs can help kids learn to respect life and to care responsibly for another being. Children can enrich dogs' lives by being social companions, friends, and playmates. However, if both are not taught to behave properly around each other, dogs and kids can frighten and injure one another.

Potential Problems Between Children and Dogs

Dogs often view children's quick and unpredictable movements as either threatening or an invitation to play. Dogs may think of small children as playmates because kids are often at eye level with dogs. Either the child or the dog, or both, may become too excited and out of control during play, and either may be injured or frightened. For example, when children and dogs play chase with each other (not a recommended game!), the dog may jump on the child and knock him down or the child is frightened, falls on the dog, and the dog is hurt.

In addition, children are still learning about their world, and may pull a dog's tail, ears, or otherwise handle him roughly without realizing they are hurting the dog. Children may throw things at the dog, just as they would throw things at each other, again without realizing this will frighten the dog or even cause the dog to bite them. These examples illustrate why constant parental supervision and guidance is critical to ensure children and dogs can be safe with each other.

Helping Children Be Good to Dogs

Children must be taught how to approach and interact gently with dogs. Tell your children to always ask the dog's owner if they can pet the dog. They should stand still and let the dog come to them rather than walk into the dog's space. Dogs communicate through body postures and to dogs, reaching over their heads, facing them, leaning over them and staring are all threatening behaviors.

Instead, a child should allow the dog to sniff a closed hand held close to the body and then scratch the dog under the chin instead of reaching over the dog's head.

Teach children how to play fetch with dogs and to use toys to play rather than wrestling or playing physical games with the dog. You will also need to train your dog to "drop" a toy when requested. While there is nothing inherently wrong with tug-of-war games (contrary to popular media, this doesn't cause dogs to be aggressive), you'll need to gauge the temperament of both your dog and your children to determine if both could play tug without becoming uncontrollable. Your dog must

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

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You must set reasonable limits for both your children and your dog.

know the “drop” or “give” command to play this game and must know to stop when told to do so.

Helping Dogs Tolerate Children

Dogs must learn, through socialization and training, how to be at ease around kids and behave appropriately around them. Socialization to children is easiest and most effective during puppyhood—between 6 and 12 weeks of age—and may prevent adult dogs from being fearful or aggressive toward children. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on socialization to learn more about this important phase of your puppy’s life.

Under supervision, have children handle the puppy and give the puppy treats. A good trainer can help you teach your puppy not to mouth or nip at children.

Older dogs without much experience with children need to have supervised, gentle, careful interactions with them by associating good things with children. To acclimate your dog to being around children, both how close the children are to your dog and what they do, should be controlled.

First, have the kids sit quietly at a distance as you give your dog treats and pet him quietly. Have the children come gradually closer and toss treats as they walk by your dog. Eventually they can offer your dog a treat from an open palm rather than holding the treat in their fingers.

Watch your dog’s reactions for signs of fear or threat. Go slowly and don’t force him to endure more than he is comfortable with. The goal is to make good things happen for your dog when kids are present.

If you see any sign of fear or aggression, you may need professional help to acclimate your dog to children. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name. Learn more about fears and aggression by reading the Pamphlets for Pet Parents on these topics.

Not all dogs can live safely with children. In some cases the dog may need to be rehomed to a family without children.

What Not To Do

Never, ever leave young children and dogs together unsupervised no matter how well behaved you think both of them are. Accidents can happen in the blink of an eye and either the child or the dog can be injured. Even though children and dogs can play together fabulously, your dog is not your child’s personal play toy. You must set reasonable limits for both your children and your dog.

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Don't allow your children to play roughly with your dog, or your dog to be overly excited and out of control with your kids. Don't use physical punishment for misbehavior on the part of either your children or your dog. To learn more about punishment, read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about it, as well as the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about using positive reinforcement for good behavior.

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