

Children and Dogs: Important Information for Parents

Living with a pet can be beneficial to children. Pets can enhance a child's self-esteem, teach them responsibility, and help them to learn empathy; however, children and dogs may not automatically start off with a wonderful relationship. Parents must teach the dog and the child acceptable limits of behavior in order to make interactions pleasant and safe.

Things to Consider when Choosing a Dog

Puppies:

- **Time and energy:** Puppies require a lot of time, patience, training, supervision, and potty training. They also require socialization in order to become well-adjusted adult dogs. This means they need to be taken appropriate places and exposed to things and people who are in their normal environment. If you have a young child who already requires a lot of care and time, will you have enough time to care for a puppy as well?
- **Safety:** Puppies, because they are babies, are somewhat fragile creatures. A puppy may become frightened, or even injured, by a well-meaning, curious child who wants to constantly pick him up, hug him, or explore his body by pulling on his tail or ears.
- **Rough play:** Puppies have sharp teeth and claws with which they may inadvertently injure a small child. Puppies also tend to jump up on small children and knock them down. All interactions between your child and puppy will need to be closely supervised or well managed (gates/crate etc.) in order to minimize the chances of an accidental injury.

Adult dogs: A well trained adult dog may require less time and attention once they've adjusted to your family and routine. Adopt a dog with a history of getting along well with children or one with a very happy demeanor who enjoys being petted and a good game of fetch. Even if you don't have other animals in your home, a dog who is friendly to other animals (especially other dogs) would be a better fit for going on walks, camping, trips to the beach, etc.

Other Considerations:

- **Breed:** Although some general statements can be made about specific dog breeds, the characteristics of an individual dog are just as important as a dog's breed. Look at all history to help make the best choice.
- **Size:** Small breeds of dogs and puppies can be easily injured by being picked up and possibly dropped or stepped on by accident. Frightened dogs may snap or bite in order to protect themselves. Larger dogs may be better able to tolerate the activity, noise and play that are an inevitable part of living with children, but can also knock children down or run over them to chase a squirrel. Please ask for more advice.

Who Will Care for the Dog?

It's unrealistic to expect a child, regardless of age, to have sole responsibility for caring for a dog. Not only do dogs need basic things like food, water and shelter, they also need to be played with, exercised and trained on a consistent basis. Teaching your dog to become a good companion is the adult's responsibility. While responsible teenagers may be up to the task, they may not be able to spend an adequate amount of time with the dog on a consistent basis. If you're adopting a dog "for the kids," you must be prepared and willing to be the dog's primary caretaker and teacher for life.

Starting Off Right

Small children should never be left alone with a dog or puppy without adult supervision.

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Holding:

- It's safest for both your child and puppy if your child is sitting on the floor whenever he wants to hold the puppy. Puppies are squirmy and wiggly and may easily fall out of a young child's arms and be injured. If held insecurely, a puppy may become frightened and snap or scratch in response. After your child is sitting on the floor, you can place the puppy in their lap.
- Stay next to your child and have your child offer the puppy a chew toy while he pets the puppy. When puppies are teething, they tend to chew on everything, including hands and arms. Having a chew toy handy will divert the puppy's teeth away from your child. As an added benefit, the puppy will associate pleasant consequences (getting a treat or toy) with being around your child.
- For larger dogs, have your child sit in your lap and let the dog approach both of you. This way you can control your child and not allow him to get "carried away" with pats that are too rough. You are also there to teach your new dog to treat your child gently by asking her to "sit," "settle," "easy," etc.

Petting and giving affection: Children often want to **hug** dogs around the neck. Your dog may view this as a threatening gesture and may react with a growl, snap or bite. You should teach your child to gently scratch underneath the dog's chin, rather than hugging him or reaching over his head. You should also teach your child to avoid staring at, or looking directly into, your dog's eyes.

Giving Treats: Children can be somewhat fearful or anxious when a dog tries to take a treat from their hand. This causes them to jerk their hand away at the last second. The dog may then jump up to get the treat, which may result in the child being knocked down. Have your child place the treat in an open palm, rather than holding it in his fingers. You may want to place a hand underneath your child's hand to help guide him.

Supervising Play: Children move with quick, jerky movements, have high-pitched voices, and often run, rather than walk. Any dog may respond to your child's behavior by chasing him, nipping at his heels, jumping up at him, or even trying to knock him down. At first, your child may need to play quietly around your new dog until he becomes more comfortable and calm. Your dog needs to learn that certain behaviors on his part are not appropriate and be taught what behaviors are okay. Most children under the age of ten are not capable of carrying out these procedures, so it's up to you to teach your dog an "easy" or "leave it" cue that you can use when play gets too rough. Teach your child to stand still "like a tree" with hands folded, looking away, to help relax the dog. Taking a training class together is a good way to teach your dog to respond to you.

It is **not** helpful is to punish your dog for his behavior. If he learns that being around children always results in "bad things" happening to him, he may become anxious, fearful or defensive in their presence.

Important! Never punish your dog for growling. Growling is how your dog can tell you that something is amiss. You must respond by asking "what's wrong?" and helping him out of the situation. If you punish the growling, your dog can't tell you when your child is pulling his tail, or making him uncomfortable. Your child will continue and potentially get snapped at or bitten. We can help you work positively on issues which may arise. Please contact us for help.

Toys: Your dog won't know the difference between his toys and your child's toys until you teach him. Try to keep your child's playthings out of the dog's reach. Don't give your dog objects to play with such as old socks, old shoes, or old children's toys that closely resemble items that are off-limits. Your dog won't be able to tell the difference. If you catch your dog chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior by calling him away from the object. When he comes, give him an acceptable chew toy and praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth. Dogs can be possessive about their food, toys, and space. It is normal for a dog to growl or snap to protect these items.

Children need to learn to respect the dog as a living creature who is not to be teased or purposefully hurt - and who needs time to himself. Check out **A Parent's Guide to Body Language** for more advice:

oregonhumane.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Parents-Guide-to-Body-Language2.pdf

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.

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