

KIDS AND DOGS

Like peanut butter and jelly, dogs and kids just go together. We had canine family members the entire time I was growing up, starting with Flag, the Beagle, then Rusty, Cinders and several other Spaniel mixes, and finally a succession of Rough Collies thanks to my love affair with Lassie. We weren't the most responsible dog owners – our dogs often roamed the neighborhood, and our females regularly had litters of mixed breed puppies. It wasn't until I was an adult that I actually had a dog die of old age and natural causes rather than catastrophe – but we loved and cared for them the best we knew how at the time. I couldn't imagine growing up without a dog.

Many families today feel the same way. A high percentage of adopters from animal shelters nationwide are families with children. Dog trainers often host entire families, kids included, in their training classes. Some offer classes specifically for children, and we are frequently asked *which* breed of dog is the best choice to have around children. (See Sidebar: Which Dog For Your Child?)

Parents often bring a dog into the home to teach children responsibility. This is an admirable motive, and often serves to teach empathy as well as responsibility, since children easily relate to their pets' feelings. I'm sure that was part of my parents' plan; the four of us kids were assigned the tasks of feeding, walking and cleaning up after our furry siblings. It worked for me.... perhaps too well, as I decided by the time I entered 1st grade that my life's work would involve animals.

The responsibility goal works well, with a couple of caveats. Parents must be good role models for empathy and responsibility. If they threaten to "get rid of" Buddy every time Susie neglects her pet care duties, the message the child hears is that the dog is disposable, and the family hasn't made a lifetime commitment to this living, breathing, feeling, family member. Susie can simply shed her responsibilities by saying in a pique of childish anger "Fine, get rid of him!" even if she doesn't really mean it. If the parents follow through on that threat, Susie may suffer considerable guilt and grief, believing that it's her fault Buddy's gone. Or she may grow up with a damaged ability to fulfill responsibilities and commit to relationships, canine or otherwise. The results of that damaged human/animal bond can be seen in the kennels of shelters across the country.

Parents must make it clear that Buddy's care can't be compromised, stepping in to help when necessary to ensure he's fed, exercised and groomed, and delivering appropriate consequences if the child neglects her duties – perhaps a loss of privileges, but not loss of Buddy. The lifelong commitment to and responsibility for the family dog ultimately rests on the shoulders of the adults in the home, not the kids.

Training

By the same token, Mom and Dad must model humane and respectful treatment of Buddy if they want Susie to learn empathy. Positive training methods are ideal for teaching empathy, utilizing pain-free tools and techniques, and emphasizing the importance of understanding how dogs think, feel and learn. In contrast, old-fashioned methods that rely on coercion and pain-administering tools such as choke chains, prong collars and shock devices, teach Susie that it's okay to hurt living things, and desensitize her to Buddy's reactions when he protests the pain.

Good trainers welcome appropriate-aged children in their training programs. Children eight years and up are usually mature enough to participate in classes, and younger children can help with Buddy's training at home. Even a two-year-old child can learn to lift a hand to her chest as a cue for Buddy to sit politely rather than jump up. An eight-year-old can also assume primary responsibility for Buddy's care (with supervision), while younger children can assist parents and older siblings and with dog care tasks. Depending on the size, training, temperament and behavior of the dog, older children may also be able to take Buddy for walks. You can use two leashes to allow younger children to help walk Buddy – you hold one leash, your child holds the other, while you make sure your leash is always shorter so you can absorb the impact if Buddy pulls.

Supervision

One of the most important things you can do for your dog and your children is to provide adequate supervision. Children under the age of seven or eight – should *always* be supervised when interacting with Buddy, and sometime older, depending on the dog and child. An overwhelming percentage of dog-related child maulings and fatalities occur with no adults present. It's critically important to remember that *any* dog can bite. Period.

A child's experiences with dogs can have a significant impact on her perspective on other living beings as she matures. It's up to you as a parent or as someone who has an impact on the life of a child, to ensure that those experiences are positive ones, so the child grows up loving, not fearing dogs, and learns how to be responsible for and caring toward the lives that she touches in this world. If all children learned empathy toward all living things as they grew up, what a wonderful world this could be.

SIDEBAR: 6 KID BEHAVIORS TO AVOID

You see inappropriate kid-dog interactions all the time – on television, in advertising, in real life. Dogs in general are pretty tolerant – they put up with a lot of kid behavior / wouldn't tolerate long without snapping. Still, your kids will be safest if you teach them to behave appropriately around dogs. Here are six things to teach your kids *not* to do.

1. Hugging and kissing. As much as this is a loving gesture on the child's part, many dogs don't perceive it as loving. These behaviors are *often* the cause of dog bites, and the child's face is usually very near the dog's mouth. Teach your child to kiss her own hand and then pet Buddy with the "kiss." Avoid hugging and kissing your dog yourself, at least in your child's presence, as this will model inappropriate behavior for your child. Your dog may tolerate your hugs but not your child's; your child may have less control over how much pressure she exerts with her hugs, and won't read or understand your dog's signals to stop. If you foolishly choose to ignore this advice and allow your child to hug and kiss her own dog, she must *absolutely* understand that it's *never* okay to hug and kiss other dogs.
2. Staring into a dog's eyes. This is a normal human behavior, especially for a child (or adult!) who is somewhat fearful of a dog. Direct eye contact can also be a strong threat to a dog. Teach your child to look at the top of (or over) a dog's head rather than directly at his eyes, even if she's nervous about him.

3. Running and screaming. Whether in fear or in play, running and screaming only elicits arousal behavior in dogs, and encourages them to chase and bite. If kids want to run and scream, dogs should be put away.
4. Teasing, pinching, poking and blowing at the dog. Kids like to see dogs react. They need to understand that these behaviors are simply forbidden because they annoy and hurt. Instead, teach them how to play fetch with Buddy so Buddy's reactions are directed toward a ball.
5. Following and chasing. When a dog walks – or runs – away from a child, he's saying he doesn't want to interact with her. If the child follows, she's pestering a dog who's clearly choosing not to be pestered, and she risks getting bitten. Teach your child to respect a dog's choice to leave. If you have very young children, it's a good idea to create escape routes and teach your dog to use them, such as low gates your dog can jump over where the child can't follow.
6. Wrestling, straddling, riding, lying on the dog. Just because some dogs seem to tolerate these behaviors doesn't mean they should have to – and it's sometimes a fine line between tolerate and bite. Wrestling encourages the dog to be inappropriately physical with humans, while straddling, riding and lying on the dog can cause pain and trigger a bite.

SIDEBAR: WHICH DOG FOR YOUR CHILD?

I am often asked what breed of dog I recommend for kids. My answer is – none. I could recommend a Labrador Retriever, and the family could turn around and adopt a Lab who would maul their child at the first opportunity. Far more important than the specific breed is the nature of the individual dog and the preferences and personalities of the family members who are adopting the dog.

I tell people the dog they adopt should *adore* children, not just tolerate them. A dog who adores small humans will forgive the inevitable kid stuff the child does, and come back for more. A dog who thinks kids walk on water won't think twice about that occasional poke in the side, and will wag his tail when the toddler trips and falls on top of him. The dog who simply tolerates children may reach the end of his fuse after one too many pokes and bite the next toddler who stumbles. The headlines will read "Dog Mauls Toddler" – and almost every time the accompanying will include two quotes"

1. "We don't know how this happened; he was always good with kids!" Well, he wasn't so good with kids – he really only tolerated them, and if the owners had been better at reading and understanding body language they would have seen the subtle signs of stress – such as walking away – that signaled the dog's discomfort and predicted the eventual bite.
2. "The bite was unprovoked." From the dog's perspective, the bite was *always* provoked – or he wouldn't have bitten! What we usually mean when we say "unprovoked" is that the bite seemed inappropriate from *our* perspective, and that we don't understand why the dog bit.

It is important to take certain qualities into consideration in addition to the "adores children" trait when adopting a dog for a kid-home. The toy breeds tend to be tiny and fragile, and are generally not recommended for small children simply because they break easily, and can become defensive and nippy when they feel threatened, which happens easily because of their size.

At the other end of the scale, the giant breeds and those known to have strong personalities with the potential to do significant damage, are often not recommended. The more the size disparity between the child and the dog, the more important it becomes that you scrupulously supervise child-dog interactions, simply because the potential for damage is greater if something does go wrong.

It's also wise to consider an older dog, rather than a puppy, if you have small children crawling around on the floor. A young pup's teeth are needle-sharp, and puppies explore everything, even tender baby skin, with their teeth. By the age of six months, a dog's adult teeth have all come in, and the adolescent dog is far less likely to have to chew on *everything*. Shelters and rescue groups are chock-full of young-adult dogs who were given up by their owners when the novelty wore off and the responsibility became too much of a burden. Consider giving one of those dogs a second chance at a lifelong loving home.

Peaceable Paws LLC
Pat Miller, CPDT, CDBC
301-582-9420
www.peaceablepaws.com

Pat Miller is a Certified Dog and Horse Behavior Consultant and Certified Professional Dog Trainer. She offers classes, behavior modification services, training clinics and academies for trainers at her 80-acre Peaceable Paws training facility in Fairplay, Maryland (US), and presents seminars worldwide. She has authored "The Power of Positive Dog Training," "Positive Perspectives," "Positive Perspectives 2," and "Play With Your Dog." Miller is training editor for The Whole Dog Journal, writes for Tuft's University's Your Dog, and several other publications. She shares her home with husband Paul, five dogs, three cats, five horses, a donkey and a potbellied pig. www.peaceablepaws.com.