



# Whole Dog Journal™

## **Dogs and Children: How to Keep Them Both Safe**

**Combining kids and dogs in your family can be magical and heartwarming, or cause a devastating tragedy. Here's how to boost the odds of the former and prevent the latter.**

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

Dogs and kids really do go together like peanut butter and jelly, and most of the time they live happy lives together without incident.

Sadly, however, this is not always the case, and when things don't go well, they can go very badly indeed. A tragically high percentage of dog-bite and dog-mauling victims are babies and young children. Small humans are far more vulnerable to dog attacks than big humans, given that their faces and throats are right at the level of most canine mouths.

Constant, alert adult supervision could prevent many of these tragedies. However, all too often adults actually encourage young children to be inappropriate with dogs because they think it's funny or cute. Supervision is useless if the adults have no more sense than the child.



Many adult dog owners trace their love of dogs to a relationship with a special dog in childhood. But many people who are afraid of dogs trace that fear to being bitten by a dog as a child. The good news is that there are many things you can do as a dog-owning parent to cultivate mutually safe, respectful, loving relationships between dogs and kids.

## Improving the Odds

Fortunately, there are many things we can do to improve the odds for safe child–dog interactions, beginning with the dog herself. Ideally, every dog should be well socialized with babies and children from puppyhood. Many young adults adopt a pup at a time when children are, if anything, a distant prospect, without seeming to realize that kids could easily arrive within the 10 to 15 years of their dog’s lifespan. Even if there will never be children in the dog’s immediate family, chances are she will encounter small humans at some point in her life. By convincing her very early on that children are wonderful, you greatly reduce the risk that she will ever feel compelled to bite one.

Note that “well–socialized with babies and children” doesn’t just mean having your young dog around kids a lot. It means frequently having your young dog around kids in a carefully controlled environment and making sure she’s having a wonderful time. The goal is to convince her that great things happen whenever children are present, thereby giving her a very positive classical association with kids.

In contrast, if children are allowed to overwhelm or frighten her, or worse, actually hurt her, you will do the exact opposite; she will have a negative classical association that you will have to work very hard to reverse. Start with one well–behaved child at a time, and only increase numbers when the pup is clearly enamored of interactions with one.

If your pup acts cautious or fearful when she first sees children or babies, go even more slowly; the pup already has a negative association that you will have to work to change. Keep the child at a distance while you have happy times with your pup – tasty treats and fun toys and games. Very gradually allow the child to come closer, and only when your pup is clearly relaxed and happy. We have a saying in behavior modification: “If you think you’re going too slow... slow down.” Or to quote my friend, trainer Laura Glaser Harrington, “Think crockpot, not microwave.”

If an adult–dog adoption is in the works and there will be children in your world, remember this critically important caveat: *Dogs who are going to be around babies and/or children must **adore** kids, not just tolerate them.* A dog who adores children will forgive many of the inappropriate things young humans will inevitably do to dogs. A dog who merely tolerates them will not.

If you’re doing a meet–and–greet with a shelter or rescue dog, or looking at a private rehome adoption, take your children with you (or borrow a friend’s if you don’t have your own yet). Your prospective canine family member should be delighted to see the kids – warm and wiggly, soft eyes, and begging to interact with them. Anything less is just tolerance, and tolerance is really just low–level avoidance – not a good sign. If you adopt a dog who only tolerates children (or worse, finds them very aversive), be prepared for a lifetime of management by putting your dog safely away when children are present.

Changing an association for an adult dog becomes more challenging the longer a dog has had to solidify the association and successfully practice behavior, such as growling or snapping, that keeps scary kids at a distance.

## **Manage and Supervise the Dog AND the Kid**

Even if your dog adores children (and especially if she doesn’t!), management and supervision are vitally important elements of successful dog/baby/child–keeping. Dog training and behavior professionals are well–known for repeating the warning, “Never leave dogs and small children together unattended.” Not for a moment. Not while you take a quick bathroom break, or run to the kitchen to grab a snack. Take the dog with you. There are a staggering number of serious child–bite cases where the adult left the room “just for a minute.” (“Small children” are generally considered up to six to seven years old.)

## **Pre-Baby Preparations for Your Dog**

If you are planning to start a family, manage your baby’s introduction to the home (and the dog) by doing your advance preparation:

- a) Classically condition your dog to love babies.
- b) Make any changes in routine and location well before the baby’s arrival (change is stressful and contributes to aggression and negative association). For example: If your dog sleeps in your bedroom, but won’t after the baby arrives, evict her now and help her adapt to her new sleeping arrangements months before the baby comes.
- c) Teach and reward your dog for a “go to your mat” behavior, so she can lie down quietly near baby activity and not feel shut out.
- d) Teach the dog to be comfortable when crated or shut in a “safe room,” so she can be removed from activity when needed, without anxiety.

e) Bring baby blankets home from the hospital to introduce your dog to the baby's smell a few days before baby comes home.

f) Have the dog well-exercised on arrival day, so there is less excitement. Let Mom come in and greet the dog first while baby stays outside, and then bring baby in, allowing the dog to be calm and relaxed when meeting the new family member.

## Child Development Basics

Here are some generalizations about child development and how it may affect your dog. It's very important that children are taught at a young age how to be appropriate with dogs and are not allowed or encouraged to tease them. Of course, every child is an individual, so each developmental stage must be addressed as appropriate for that child:

**0–6 months:** Prior to the age of six months, a baby's cries can trigger a [predatory response in some dogs \(/issues/6\\_7/features/Canine-Predatory-Instincts\\_5556-1.html\)](/issues/6_7/features/Canine-Predatory-Instincts_5556-1.html), and this is believed to be the cause of many dog–baby tragedies. Although predatory behavior is not truly aggression, the result to the victim can be just as devastating. Manage and supervise.

**6–24 months:** When a baby becomes mobile, there is a much greater likelihood that she will intrude into the dog's space, and the dog may become defensively aggressive. Some dogs who are fine with babies at first get pretty uncomfortable when the strange little human starts to move around. Manage and supervise.

**2–5 years:** At this age, young humans start to become more independent and are likely to deliberately pursue and even pester the dog, trying to take her toys, interfering while she's eating, chase her, and fondle or pull on canine body parts. They may want to snuggle with, hug, or kiss the dog, who may not be willing to reciprocate. Children also start having friends over – more kids to watch! Manage and supervise.

**5–9 years:** Children continue to want to interact with the dog and are more likely to deliberately tease, try to boss the dog around, reprimand, or punish, and roughhouse – especially if they see these behaviors modeled by adult humans in the home. Children at the upper end of this age range may begin to take some responsibility for feeding, grooming, and exercising the dog, and do not require as much management and supervision.

**9–12 years:** At this age, kids should be beyond the need for constant supervision, but still need to be monitored to ensure appropriate interactions. They may still tend to tease, roughhouse, or even abuse the dog. Monitor.

## Training Your Dog for Children

The more promptly and happily your dog responds to your cues, the easier life is with kids and dogs. A cheerful "Settle!" cue keeps the dog from playing uncomfortably close to the baby. (See "[Teach Your Dog to Settle Down \(/issues/18\\_9/features/How-to-Teach-Your-Dog-To-Settle-Down-And-Relax-On-Cue\\_21306-1.html\)](/issues/18_9/features/How-to-Teach-Your-Dog-To-Settle-Down-And-Relax-On-Cue_21306-1.html)".) If the pacifier plops out of the baby's mouth onto the floor, a timely "Leave it!" can prevent a spontaneous game of "keep away" and save the day. (See "[Teach Your Dog to 'Leave It' on Cue \(/issues/11\\_8/features/How-To-Teach-A-Dog-To-Listen\\_16053-1.html\)](/issues/11_8/features/How-To-Teach-A-Dog-To-Listen_16053-1.html)".) If you see your dog getting too excited when your son is roughhousing with his friends in the backyard, [a really reliable recall can be a blessing \(/issues/15\\_9/features/Training-A-Fast-Reliable-Recall\\_20603-1.html\)](/issues/15_9/features/Training-A-Fast-Reliable-Recall_20603-1.html).

Training can also help keep your dog from feeling ignored by all the attention paid to the newcomer. Have at least one family member continue regular training with her – attending classes if possible, keeping her responses to cues tuned up, as well as keeping her brain busy. Show your child how to properly ask for and reinforce your dog’s good-manners behaviors (if your dog doesn’t take treats delicately, have your toddler toss the treats on the ground, or just say “Good dog!” while you dispense the treats). At the age of around seven, your child will be ready to actively participate in training as well, which will also improve or maintain a good relationship between dog and kid.

## Dogs' Body Language

We would be remiss if we didn’t also include a discussion of canine body language. All the supervision in the world isn’t going to help if you’re standing next to your dog and she is very uncomfortable with the attentions of the child who is petting her. A bite can happen that fast, and even though you are right there, you won’t be quick enough to stop it. The better you are at reading dog body language, the better prepared you’ll be to intervene and protect both child and dog before it’s too late. (For more information on canine body language, see “[Guide to Reading Canine Body Language \(/issues/14\\_8/features/Canine-Body-Language-Defined\\_20325-1.html\)](/issues/14_8/features/Canine-Body-Language-Defined_20325-1.html)”.)

Meanwhile, don’t let the horror stories scare you. Millions of children live happily ever after with their canine pals. Yours can too, as long as you raise them both with common sense, good management, and supervision.

## Resources for Dog-Owning Parents

There is a wealth of information and resources available to parents who want to successfully raise dogs and kids together. Here are some of our favorites:

### App

[DogDecoder \(http://www.dogdecoder.com/\)](http://www.dogdecoder.com/): Helpful, clear information on reading and understanding dog body language

### Books

*Living With Dog and Kids Without Losing Your Mind*, by Colleen Pelar

*A Kid's Comprehensive Guide to Speaking Dog!* by Niki Tudge

*Please Don't Bite the Baby (and Please Don't Chase the Dog)*, by Lisa Edwards (half memoir, half training guide)

### Video

[Toddler Feeding a Dog \(https://www.instagram.com/p/Bc2WCLSnKLO/?taken-by=attapuptraining\)](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bc2WCLSnKLO/?taken-by=attapuptraining): Very good video showing appropriate management and interaction between a young child and a dog

## Websites

[Familypaws.com \(https://www.familypaws.com/\)](https://www.familypaws.com/): Excellent website with tons of info on dogs and toddlers, including resources and programs

[Doggoneseafe.com \(https://www.doggoneseafe.com/\)](https://www.doggoneseafe.com/): Another highly informative website with lots of info on households with dogs and kids

[ASPCA site \(https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/dogs-and-babies\)](https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/dogs-and-babies): Good info on dogs and babies

[pleasedontbitethebaby.com \(http://www.pleasedontbitethebaby.com/\)](http://www.pleasedontbitethebaby.com/): Good blogs on life with dogs and babies

[ISpeakDog.org \(http://www.ispeakdog.org/\)](http://www.ispeakdog.org/): Excellent website on reading and understanding dog body language

## DOGS AND CHILDREN: OVERVIEW

1. Be a responsible dog-owning parent – always be present and supervise interactions between your dog and your young child.
2. Teach your children well. Help your child understand at an early age what's appropriate behavior with dogs.
3. Make wise adoption and training choices if you plan to have children in your life.

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