

Owning a dog can be a wonderful experience for all family members, especially children. Dogs can enhance a child's self-esteem, teach them responsibility and help them learn empathy. However, children and dogs may not always automatically start off with a perfect relationship. Parents must be willing to teach both the dog and their children acceptable limits of behavior in order to make their interactions pleasant and safe.

Below are some guidelines to help you start off on the right foot.

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



Petting and Giving Affection

Children often want to hug dogs around the neck, but dogs can see this gesture as a threat, and may react with a growl, snap, or bite. Teach your child to pet the dog under their chin rather than hugging them reaching over their head. You should also teach them to avoid staring at, or looking directly into your dog's eyes.



Holding Puppies and Small Dogs

It's safest for both your child and puppy if your child is sitting down whenever holding the puppy. Puppies are squirmy and wiggly and may easily fall out of a young child's arms and become injured. If held insecurely, a puppy may become frightened and snap or nip in response. Instead, have your child sit and offer the puppy a toy to chew while being petted. This will help divert the puppy's teething mouth away from your child's hands and arms. This will also teach your puppy pleasant consequences (getting a toy) with being held by your child.

Holding Medium and Large Dogs

For larger dogs, have your child sit in your lap and let the dog approach both of you. This will allow you to control your child and not let them get carried away with pats that are too rough. You are also there to teach your new dog to treat your child gently.

Supervising Play

Children running, jerky movements, and high-pitched voices can be very stimulating for a dog, which may lead them to chase or jump on your child. Encourage your child to play quietly around your new dog until they become more comfortable with each other. Your dog also needs to learn what behaviors are acceptable and which ones aren't. It's helpful to teach your dog a "leave it" command for when play gets too rough. Punishing your dog for inappropriate behavior will not help, in fact, it may reinforce that being around your child results in "bad things", which may make your dog become defensive in their presence.

Possessions

Your dog won't know the difference between their toys and your child's toys until you teach them. Your child must take responsibility to keep their toys out of the dog's reach. If you catch your dog chewing on something they shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, then give them an acceptable chew toy and praise them when they take the toy in their mouth. Don't confuse your dog by giving them objects to play with that closely resemble things that are off limits, such as old socks, old shoes, or old children's toys. Dogs can also be possessive of their food, toys, and space. Although it's normal for a dog to growl or snap to protect these things, it's not acceptable. At the same time, children need to learn to respect their dog.

