



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Children and Dogs

It's tempting to think that kids and dogs go together like peanut butter and jelly, but that isn't always the case. In fact, it takes a very special dog to live with a child, and vice versa. In general, unless you're a very experienced dog owner, we recommend that your youngest child be at least five before you adopt a dog.

Dogs are social animals, and live in families very happily. However, they do not think they are people; indeed, in order to successfully meld a dog into your family, you'll need to think more like a dog! Here are possible problems that could arise with both puppies and adult dogs.



Puppies

Puppies explore their world with their teeth. They do not understand that children are not puppies, and they cannot tell the difference between something that is "theirs" and something that is Jimmy's. Their world includes children's toys, articles of clothing, pieces of furniture...and, last but certainly not least, CHILDREN themselves. Dogs also tend to play by jumping on kids. The smaller the kid, the more likely the jumping will hurt them or knock them over.

Children explore their world with their hands. They do not understand dogs, and they do not know that dogs actually have and will use their teeth. Children tend to want to hug dogs, to poke at them with their fingers, and to pull their hair and ears. That hurts, so the puppies sometimes respond by yelping – and nipping. The bite is meant to inhibit the painful behavior on the part of the child and to make it not happen again. A pup would do that to another puppy, and the lesson would be learned. Unfortunately, the skin of a child is much more fragile than that of a puppy, and the nip can draw blood. In addition, the dog is usually punished, which can result in the dog disliking the child.

Adult Dogs

Although some adult dogs that have not lived amongst children do quite well, others can be either intimidated or stimulated by kids' actions. Dogs naturally want to chase moving objects, and playing, noisy children can spark that behavior. When they catch up to the kids, the dogs might knock them down....or playfully nip at them. This is not a behavior we want to encourage! Some types of dogs, like terriers, northern breeds and herding breeds, tend to be the most chase-oriented, though all dogs certainly can be.

Some dogs are frightened of children, and will try to run away when kids approach. Children might then chase the dog...and the dog will keep trying to increase the distance between them. If the dog is cornered he or she will snap.

Adult dogs may also see children as "puppies" that need to be kept in line. If a puppy behaves inappropriately, the adult dog will snap at the pup's muzzle, sometimes connecting, sometimes not. The adult knows precisely how much the pup needs to be corrected. Even if the puppy is bitten, the bite very rarely draws blood – it just teaches the puppy to stop what it's doing. Unfortunately, some adult dogs will do the same thing to an unruly child – but, once again, a child's face is not as tough as a puppy's – and trauma is often the result.

Often, an adult dog that is just fine with adult humans can be unreliable around children – sometimes he will inappropriately guard objects, food or toys. Since it's difficult to test for this behavior with a real child, a shelter or rescue organization may not know this.



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The Family Dog

The perfect dog for a family with small kids can be difficult to find – but well worth the search. The operant word is tolerant. If you want a puppy, look for one that can be handled easily without seeming perturbed. You should be able to cradle the pup in your arms, and have him relax completely. If you make sudden movements, the puppy should neither cringe from fear, nor launch himself at you. He should want to follow you around, rather than go off by himself. He should like to play with objects (like balls or toys). If he bites you (which he most likely will!), try yelling “ouch” and see if he backs up. If he does, that’s great. If he gets angry, seems to become more aroused, or increases his biting activity, he may not be the dog for you.

If you’d rather not go through the house-training process, adult dogs that have lived in a family with small children are often the best bet. Again, we’re looking for tolerance. A dog is NOT a good candidate if he doesn’t seek attention from you, wanders off while you’re trying to get to know him, or puts his teeth on your arm – even gently – while you pet or touch him, especially if you try to touch his paws or tail area. Watch carefully when introducing the dog to the children, and pay attention to what you see. Some dogs may come around in time, but you may not have the time to train.

No matter what dog you get for your family, management is the key to success. Never leave a new dog and small child alone together. In fact, never leave any dog and a small child alone together! Always be on the alert for possible problems... and let both child and dog know when you’re happy with the way they’re behaving.

General Recommendations

- Wait until your youngest child is at least five before adopting a dog
- Control the environment - make sure you can separate the dog from the children when you're not in a position to watch them
- Teach puppies to play with appropriate objects – such as balls and toys – rather than human hands or limbs
- Teach children to respect dogs as individuals
- Realize that dogs need a great deal of exercise and stimulation, and that they explore their world with their mouth
- Reinforce any behavior you would like to see repeated

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