

Dogs and Children

Dogs can be wonderful companions for families with children, but families should follow some basic, common-sense guidelines.

Children should be taught how to behave around dogs, even if their own family does not own a dog. For example, a child should never approach a strange dog without asking the owner if it is OK to pet the dog. If the child sees a loose dog on the street, they should not approach it even if they know the dog belongs to a friend.

A child should not scream or run away from a loose or unfamiliar dog. Running can trigger a dog's instinct to chase.

Most dogs, even those that are well-trained, do not consider children figures of authority. Children may also stare intently at animals, which some dogs can find threatening. Even a good-natured dog may bite to protect itself in these circumstances, especially if it feels cornered.

Once a child is given permission to approach a dog, they should allow the dog to sniff them calmly before attempting to pet it. The child should avoid reaching suddenly toward the dog's face or head.

Children should never hug a dog that is not their own, and should only hug their own dog gently if the dog is comfortable with it. Children should be taught never to hit dogs with their hands or an object, to lower their voices when playing with a dog, to leave the dog alone when sleeping, eating, or ill, and to never tease a dog in any fashion.

1. **The dog should never be left alone with a young child.** A young child may challenge or injure the dog unintentionally, and the result could be tragic. Dogs and children should also be separated at snack time so the dog does not learn to steal food from small hands.
2. **The dog should have a place they can call their own - a retreat, private room, or den.** This can be a special room or crate in the house. Children should never be allowed to bother the dog when the dog is in this private place.
3. **If the dog has access to a fenced yard, make sure neighborhood children cannot accidentally or intentionally tease the dog.** Teasing can create fear, frustration, or aggression and can seriously damage a dog's comfort around children.
4. **Provide a crate or other safe retreat where the dog can escape the attention of boisterous or over-excited children.**
5. **Teach children to leave the dog alone when the dog is in the crate, to pet gently without squeezing around the neck, and to leave the dog alone while eating.**
6. **Use caution with games such as tug-of-war when a dog regularly interacts with children.** Keep play structured and teach the dog to release items on cue so children's toys and clothing do not become part of the game.
7. **Teach children not to run past the dog while screaming.** Fast movement and loud noises can excite or frighten a dog and may lead to chasing or other unwanted behavior.

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The sight of a child and a dog napping together on the sofa or floor, playing in the yard, or simply spending quiet time together can be a wonderful thing. The potential relationship between a child and a family dog is precious, and it needs to be nurtured and guided. Families can help build that relationship by teaching both the dog and the child to respect each other's space, needs, and boundaries.