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Dealing With Children Who Are Afraid of Your Dog When They Visit

Q: During the holidays, we had a young relative visit our home who was terrified of our dog, who is a little excitable but very good natured. I couldn't seem to convince the child—or his parents—that there was nothing to be afraid of. What can we do for such encounters in future?

A: The first requirement is to respect the fear and avoid frightening the child more. Thus the dog should be leashed, at least for a while, so it can't rush up to the child. A big, lively dog might best be put away in another room until the child is calm or until the child goes home.

A little child can be held in arms to watch other people pet and perhaps feed the dog. My own dogs are taught to sit with their backs turned so very small children can touch the dog's fur without encountering the dog's sniffing nose and licking tongue. ALL interactions between someone else's nervous child and your dog should be 100% monitored by you, and if that can't be managed due to your other responsibilities, the dog should be crated or put somewhere else (in the car, if there is no other alternative).

If a baby or small child is going to be in my house for more than a few minutes, I get out the clicker and treats. With the child in someone's arms, I ask the dog to sit. I toss a treat to the dog. I ask for a sit again, hand a treat to the child, click, and tell the child to throw the treat. Even very young tots will throw a treat to the dog after seeing you do it once, and they seem to find it interesting to see the dog pick up and eat it. From then on the clickerwise dog will respond to the child's presence by sitting and waiting hopefully for a click—a safe and tolerable behavior.

Lynn Loar, Ph.D., author of *Teaching Empathy*, works with shelter dogs and inner-city families who are often quite afraid of dogs to start with. Her icebreakers include allowing children to dip a finger in a jar of peanut butter and letting the dog lick it off; one could start with a spoon, instead of the finger.

Perhaps the biggest problem with visiting children, however, is not the fearful child but the fearless child who also is ignorant about dogs. This is the child that may hit a dog, climb or lie on it, hug it (most dogs hate that), or poke at it. The parents are not likely to be helpful, since if they knew anything about dogs the child wouldn't be doing these things. In this case, the dog should be removed from the scene at once; don't bother trying to teach manners to the child, and don't risk the child doing something, usually in the twinkling of an eye, which might really provoke a bite. You may be sure the parents will not blame the child if the dog nips in self-defense.

I once entertained a young couple who arrived with a four-year-old son who was both fearless and clueless about dogs. My terrier adored babies and children and handled himself well with them, so I did not think to separate them until I heard a scream of real anguish from the dog. Underneath the dining-room table, and out of sight, while the dog screamed and the parents laughed fondly, the boy had grabbed the terrier firmly in both fists by his chin whiskers, and was pulling hard.

I dived into the fray, grabbed his chubby little fists, and pinched them hard enough so he let go (he was holding on so tight I could not just pry his fingers loose, I tried that first). Now the child was crying because I had hurt him, the parents were mad, and I was thanking my lucky stars that my fine little dog hadn't bitten anyone, including me.

Moral: Look out for your dog, as well as the children. Safety should always come first.

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