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Dogs and Kids – Be Safe Not Sorry

All children should be taught to respect other living beings, be they animal or human. From birth, children need to learn that some things are just not allowed, and "be gentle" should be a common household command. Even if your household does not contain animals, your children should still be taught the basics. One day they will encounter an animal, whether it is somebody else's pet in a controlled environment, or a meeting on the street with a strange dog.

- ◆ **The Right Approach** - This is very important! From the time they first understand, you must teach your children how to approach a dog properly! What is the right way to approach a dog? Approach his owner first and ask permission! Saying "Hello" after permission is given. Approach slowly, do not run up to a dog, ever. Hold your hand out, palm down, and let the dog sniff you. Let him decide how close he wants to get. Many dogs love attention, but **the first few moments of every new meeting is critical.** A correct approach will likely have the new dog sliding in closer for pets.
- ◆ **Dog's Do Not Like Hugs and Kisses** - We cannot stress this strongly enough. Don't think that your dog is an exception to this - because you are wrong and you are setting your child and your dog up for potential tragedy. Teach your kids not to hug or kiss the dog on the face. Hugging the family dog or face-to-face contact are common causes of bites to the face. Teach your kids to scratch the dog on the chest or on the side of the neck - most dogs do enjoy this. If your child is a toddler or does not follow instructions, then do not allow access to the dog unless you have your hands on the dog.
- ◆ **Be Gentle** - This is so important, but so many parents don't notice how rough their children are. A gentle hand will carry them through so many different situations in life, not just meeting animals. When your child approaches a dog, show them how to pet "gently". Don't let them pull on ears or fur, but a gentle rubbing of the fur, or feeling of the ears is okay. Don't let them squeeze handfuls of fur, and make sure they know that a tail is not a handhold. If your child has a normally heavy hand, don't use a real dog for the first time, use a stuffed animal. A dog might not be as patient with grabbing hands as you would think.
- ◆ **Be Quiet and Calm** - Encourage your children to be quiet and calm when they interact with a dog. Teach them how to reward calm, attentive behavior and how to ignore the dog when he is behaving inappropriately.
- ◆ **Never Run Away From A Dog** - Running will only trigger a "prey" response, and a dog that may have been content to sit and watch will suddenly chase. Even a dog whose only intent is to "play" may cause devastating results when the "prey" is caught.
- ◆ **Never Approach a Dog When He is Eating** - Parents, this should be common sense, every child should know this, whether you have pets in the home or not.
- ◆ **Parents! Never Leave Your Child With a Dog Unattended!** - Accidents happen in the blink of an eye, and even the gentlest family dog will bite if he is in pain, or if he has just "had enough".



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- ◆ **Appropriate Games** - Teach your children how to play games with a dog that will enhance their relationship. All retrieving games and hide 'n seek are excellent games for dogs and children. They also help keep your dog well exercised and tired. Tug-O-War should never be played between children and dogs. Playing rough (roughhousing) should not be allowed. Encourage your children to be calm and quieter when interacting with a dog, playing nicely and petting softly.
- ◆ **When Separate Is Best** - Many of the things that children do naturally, such as running, shrieking, and boisterous play can be over-stimulating to a dog. If your children are roughhousing with each other and/or playing with a group of friends, it would be wise to separate the dog from the children. Put your dog down for a nap in his crate with a special treat like a stuffed Kong, or let another family member entertain him.
- ◆ **Let The Dog Have Space** - If you see your dog trying to get away from a child, don't let the child follow the dog. Allow the dog to have his/her own space at times. As parents, you need to be consistent in this, so that the child understands that you mean what you say, and the dog learns he can count on you to rescue him. Remember that young children don't recognize when they may be in trouble. It's up to the adult to keep them safe from the dog and to keep the dog safe from the children.
- ◆ **Keep Things Calm** - Even the friendliest dogs can be uncomfortable with a child's quick movements and loud tone of voice. Children tend to get excited around dogs, approaching quickly, talking loudly, sometimes even hugging. Any one of these actions can easily result in a bite.
- ◆ **Be a Tree if a Strange Dog Approaches** - teach kids to be a tree – Trees are boring and the dog will eventually go away. This works for strange dogs and even your own dog if he is getting too frisky or becomes aggressive. All children should learn to be a tree and to do this when a strange dog approaches, their own dog is getting too frisky or any dog is bothering them. Dogs are excited and stimulated by movement and will chase a child that runs. The erratic movements and high pitched sounds that children make can cause some dogs to view them as prey and a chasing or wrestling game can suddenly become deadly. Do not allow children to play rough games with dogs.





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- ◆ **Supervise** - do not assume that your dog is good with kids, even if it has never bitten before. Supervision means that you are right there paying attention to the situation - not in the house or on the phone or in another room. Never leave a young child unsupervised with a dog. Never allow any child to play unsupervised with multiple dogs. If a toddler must interact with your dog, you should have your hands on the dog too. Even if your dog is great with kids and has never bitten - why take a chance? Learn how to read your dog's body language (see articles regarding Calming Signals).
- ◆ **Many Dog Bites Could Be Prevented** - if parents and children were aware of the subtle communication signs that dogs send. A dog may warn that it wants to be left alone by leaving the room, diverting his eyes or turning his head, yawning or licking his lips when the kids are bothering them for weeks, months or even years before finally getting to the point that the dog feels he has no choice but to bite. Parents often tell us that the dog bite was unprovoked and without warning, but there is always provocation and a warning. Many people simply do not recognize the warning signs, even though the dog has been exhibiting these for weeks, months or even years.
- ◆ **All Children Are Not The Same** - A dog may tolerate actions from familiar children that would not be tolerated from strange children. You need to take extra safety precautions when other children visit and make sure that the visiting children obey your ground rules.

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