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Keeping Playdates Bite free!

By Jennifer Shryock

Karen's daughter Emma asked to visit at a friend's house. Karen knows the family well and enjoys visiting too. Arrangements are made and the date is set. Emma is eagerly planning her visit, what to bring, share, wear etc. This is something all kids love! What is better than playing at someone else's house when you're a kid? Different toys, games and rules! What fun.

Karen begins to regret that the play date is several days away as Emma asks her every hour in anticipation "when is it again Mom?" Karen assures her that the day is coming and time will pass quickly and suggests Emma makes a card or picture for her friend.

Finally! The morning of the long anticipated play date has arrived!! Emma has her toys packed to share and is ready to go. As Karen finishes brushing Emma's hair Emma turns around with a huge smile and says "I can't wait to see Sasha!" Karen smiled back at her admiring how beautiful she looked in her outfit and thinking how pretty she looked with her hair back away from her face. She is so beautiful. She thought. Karen's sentimental Mommy moment was interrupted by Emma's excitement to go get something to bring Sasha. Sasha is the family's beautiful and adorable odd looking mutt! No one can even begin to guess for sure what she is a mix of but no one really cares as she is small enough to play with and not too big and overwhelming. Karen and Emma gather up all the things for the visit and grab several carrots and a biscuit for Sasha. As Karen starts the car Emma is chattering away in the back seat about the fun she will have and how fun it will be to see Sasha at the door when you arrive. She is always there wagging and loves the treats!

When they arrived Emma and Karen were greeted by Kayla and her Mom (Eva) followed by Sasha. The treats were given out while both Moms chatted for a minute. The two girls busily ran off to play. Sasha is still sniffing around for potential treats and does not seem to notice the girls. Karen gives Eva her cell phone number and sets a time for pick up and heads out to run some errands. An hour goes by when Karen's cell phone rings. She answers the phone:

"Hello?" She answers

She hears Eva on the line saying; "Karen, I am so sorry, It's me Eva, Emma, Emma is hurt."

She says with panic in her voice. Karen can hear Emma screaming in the background. She feels a pit in her stomach.



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Karen feels the stress and responds;

“Is she ok, what happened? I am on my way!”

Eva replies through her tears;

“Karen, I don’t know what happened. The girls were playing so well and having fun. I heard giggling and they were dancing and then all of a sudden I heard screaming and Kayla saying “Mommy Come quick! Sasha bit Emma!” Karen can hear Eva shaking on the phone as she is saying she is so sorry. She is really shaken as she tries to tell Karen what has happened to Emma.

Karen says “Sasha Bit Emma? Where? How bad is it? Is Emma ok?”

Eva replies, “I am so sorry Karen, on her lip, her nose, she is bleeding. I am so sorry. I don’t understand it Sasha loves the girls. I am so sorry Karen.” Eva is sobbing.

Karen replies “I am on my way. Does Emma want to talk to me?” She asks

Karen can hear Emma crying hard in the background. She is desperate to help her and hopes letting her know she is on her way will help her a little.

As tears are streaming down Karen’s cheeks she thinks back to earlier that morning when she was brushing Emma’s hair and admiring her beauty. Would she have scars? How bad is the mark? Karen thinks of Emma’s excitement about Sasha. Emma’s must be so confused! Her feelings surely were going to be hurt. Karen is confused too. What happened???? Karen feels so mixed and panicky as she drives as fast as she can to Eva’s house. Poor Eva she thinks how awful she must feel. This is awful and Karen prays that Emma is ok and that the bite is not that bad.

Karen arrives and sees Emma holding ice on her mouth. She hugs Emma and takes a look at her. It is clear to Karen that they will need to go to the pediatrician. Eva breaks into tears now feeling responsible for this having happened in her home. Eva says. “Karen, Emma I am so sorry. I do not know why this happened. Sasha always loves to play and she knows and loves Emma. I am so sorry!” Karen hugs Eva reminding her that this was an accident. Karen and Emma then head off to their pediatrician to have the bite looked at.



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The above situation is fictional however it is one I hear all too often as a Dog Behavior consultant. As parents we do our best to protect our children. I wrote this above scenario in the hopes that it makes you think. Family dogs are wonderful and fun. They provide incredible learning opportunities that nothing can replace. They listen to our stories and put up with our crazy human ways. What we need to keep in mind is that they are still animals. They communicate differently than we do with one another. Dogs that bite are not “bad” dogs. Most often they are dogs that are treated and seen more as a human than a dog. Often expectations of the dog and child are unreasonable. Dogs have their own way that they communicate with one another. They use these same signals with us. We often do not recognize them until we have a need to learn about them. A terrific resource on these communication signals is written by Turid Rugaas called *On Talking terms with Dogs, Calming Signals*. I recommend parents become familiar with the signals dogs offer to indicate stress or potential conflict. Even if you do not own a dog, chances are you come across them and your kids want to approach them. Learning what to look for so you can count on your own skills to recognize if it is safe or the dog wants your child to approach is critical! Many owners will indicate it is safe to approach when the dog is indicating stress. You can prevent a sad outcome by becoming aware of basic communication.

Although a dog may enjoy children, all dogs have tolerance limits. Our mistake is often to assume that because there has not been a problem that there will not ever be one. This can be a TRAGIC misconception! “He always let the kids do anything to him until he snapped out of the blue!” “He usually loves to play with the kids I have no idea what happened.” Sadly I hear these remarks on a daily basis. I believe education is the only way to make something change. Dogs will indicate stress and or potential conflict in many ways prior to a growl, snap or bite. It is our responsibility to know what to look for to decrease the risk of conflict between our dogs and children. A dog that bites often does not get a second chance. Once a bit happens it leaves the entire family and victim feeling guilty, sad and fearful and maybe even angry. It is my hope that this article will be of help to you and your family. Dogs are wonderful companions but they need us to respect them as the animals and dogs that they really are. I encourage you to learn so that you can have a wonderful and respectful lifelong bond with your family companion and other dogs your family encounter.

When children are visiting your home or others that have dogs please take these things into consideration:

1. Plan ahead how and if you will introduce the child and dog.
2. Is the child fearful of dogs?
3. Have a place for your dog to safely have quiet time away from the children. Crate, yard, gated off area that the kids are not going to disturb him.
4. **ADULT SUPERVISION NO MATTER WHAT** when the dog is around children. If an adult is not there to defer to when a dog is stressed then he will defer to his natural responses to stress. Licking lips, head turning, moving away, yawning. These are all subtle signals (calming signals Turid Rugaas) that often kids miss or misinterpret. These



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signals are usually displayed in the dog's efforts to reduce stress or conflict prior to showing teeth, snarling, growling or a bite. I highly recommend the game DOGGONE CRAZY! (www.doggonecrazy.ca) to help your children learn doggie language and all about these signals. It is amazingly fun and effective in teaching doggie language.

5. If your dog is not comfortable with kids then respect that and get help from a dog behavior consultant to work on helping him be more comfortable. *It's okay to put doggie away. When in doubt leave him out.*
6. If it's a doggy home then have a kid zone! This is a place the dog can not come into without an adult. It is the kids play space that is completely dog free.
7. If there are multiple dogs in the home then consider only allowing one out with you at a time...
8. When your child visits a home with a dog be sure to ask the rules and safety measures the parents have in place.
9. Trust your gut. Follow your instincts. If it feels unsafe....it most likely is. Do not wait to find out.
10. Never allow children to play in a yard unsupervised if a dog is in the yard.

For information and resources visit www.familypaws.com and www.doggonesafe.com

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Jennifer is an experienced Mom and dog behavior consultant. The focus of her private practice is education for families with children and dogs to help increase safety and fun for all.