

**Children and Dogs**  
**Tips to Help make and keep the Relationship S.A.F.E.R. 🐾**  
~ Maureen Ross, M.A.~

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**S.A.F.E.R. & W.A.I.T.**  
*Supervise, Anticipate, Follow-Through, Educate and Respect*  
*Wait, Ask, Invite, Touch!*

By following a few simple steps, you can child-proof your dog and dog-proof your child. Approximately 154,000 children (USA) go to the emergency room every year for dog-related injuries. The good news is this number is less than accidents with toys, playgrounds, sports or domestic abuse and violence from humans! All the same, one bite is one too many.

Most dog bites are a result of human error AND it can be prevented. Here are a few helpful tips to make it safer for both dogs and children.

**1. SUPERVISE**

Please do not leave young kids and dogs unsupervised, particularly those under the age of 12 or not use to being around dogs, and especially dogs they are not familiar with. Dogs, especially puppies, see toddlers and kids as littermates, not pack leaders.

Dogs are a different species and speak a different native language. They communicate, play and rough-house how they would with other dogs, not humans.

In an idealistic and perfect (Disney) world, we want children and dogs to get along and have the ultimate respect for one another. In the “real” world this is an impossible goal and unfair to both species. However, management and supervisor during play between children and dogs is possible.

*Case Example:* Recently, a distraught mother called to say that her dog snapped at her 4 year old. She wanted to know if the dog should be put to sleep. It turns out, after assessment, that the child was chasing the dog with a plastic bat. The dog didn't need to be put to sleep. The dog needed a bodyguard!

If you can't supervise, then separate the children and dogs. Use a baby-gate or crate. Schedule small play sessions where you can supervise safe interactions between the child and dog.

On another occasion, a Mom learned this lesson when her daughter invited a friend over to play. Mom left the room for 5-minutes to return and observe her daughter's friend roughly sticking her fingers into the dog's eyes. Luckily, the dog tolerated this, but ... imagine what could have unnecessarily happened and the ramifications for the dog?

## **Should we expect our pets to put up with abusive behavior?**

You know the answer to this. Absolutely not! Children need to be taught to respect other species and other cultures. Dogs need to be taught respect and how sit, wait and be invited to interact by an adult or child. Both of these goals are attainable with positive training. These valuable life sessions will follow them into adolescence and adulthood, in careers, relationships and through life's journey.

### **2. ANTICIPATE**

Avoid risky situations. If your dog is shy, put him/her in a quiet part of the house before your 8-year olds birthday party. If your child is excited about a new toy (one that the dog doesn't realize is not his yet) consider crating your dog until you have time to teach the difference. If you have any feelings of doubt, listen to the inner voice that is saying "caution". Act first so you don't have to react later. Being pro-active will make living with pets less stressful, confusing and more pleasant.

### **3. FOLLOW-THROUGH**

Often I hear "I can't stop my child from bothering the dog." My answer with compassion is "bull". If your child were harassing an infant, you would stop it immediately. Following through with both species is critical as a parent and role model. "Enough" or "Stop it," means just that for child or dog.

**Fair boundaries and guidelines are essential.** Otherwise, keep them apart and schedule small, supervised play sessions. The dog is not the child's toy and vice versa. Children and dogs can make great companions with supervision. Both respond well to focusing on and rewarding good behavior.

### **4. EDUCATE**

Dogs know and are good at being dogs! To understand our world and culture, we need to teach them. Want your dog to be comfortable with kids near its food bowl? Then hand feed your dog with a few kibbles after you get a sit every day. Children who are old enough can assist and/or observe the parent / dog interaction. It can be a family learning experience that includes the puppy. Dropping a delicious treat into the dog's bowl is another way to create positive association between hands and dog bowl.

If you have an adopted pup/dog, please practice this when NO CHILD is around to imitate you. Hopefully, any dog that is place with a family has already been food tested for safety and resource guarding. If the dog wags its tail, great! If it freezes, growls or starts to aggressively gobble the food, don't push it. Instead, contact a local trainer or behaviorist for advice.

The same guidelines apply for sleeping dogs and dog beds. If you are not sure (adopted dogs), have the dog assessed. Most dogs need to learn to accept children and adults near their resources (coveted objects). Some never will, so management is key.

## 5. RESPECT & ROLE MODEL

Going to have a toddler in your life? Prepare your dog now. Without children around, use some treats and practice handling your dog. Drop some treats into the dog's bowl. Crawl into your dog's crate. Touch their beds. Observe reactions.

Dogs need a respect Pack Leader. This pack leader will provide the life rewards necessary for survival. You, as the pack leader, are providing boundaries and guidelines for how your dog should act (with savvy) to get his needs met. This includes food, play, touch, exercising and cuddling.

**MANTRA:** You do something for me, and I will do something for you!

Desensitize dogs to being touched by "getting connected with them." Pet them gently and calmly from head to toe, focusing on your toes, tail and the body parts that will eventually be touched by humans (children, groomers, friends, veterinarians). Gently tug the dog's tail.

Teach "take-it / leave-it". "Drop-it" is another of my favorites for families with kids. This teaches the dog to drop something, It keeps the wiggly hands away from the dog's mouth. Integrate Object Exchange daily: "here, take this treat and give me the ball."

Preparing your dog and children for safe and respectful interactions will keep them safe and you sane! By using a simple reminder like W.A.I.T. (wait, ask, invite, touch) you can help create and teach safer interactions between dogs and children. Greetings are preferable from the side (not frontal). Most children get nipped running straight up and into a dog's face. If a dog is use to this, fine. Most are not! Appropriate greeting whether dog-to-dog or human-to-dog is side-ways, not frontal.

For more information we invite you to our web sites [www.dogtalk.com](http://www.dogtalk.com), click on canine coach or pick up a copy of Train Your Dog, Change Your Life at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com).

Enjoy the Journey!