

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

S.A.F.E.R. & W.A.I.T.
Supervise, Anticipate, Follow-Through, Educate and Respect
Wait, Ask, Invite, Touch, not Bang!

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, comes with warnings from our dogs, AND is preventable. Here are a few helpful tips to make it safer for both dogs and children.

1. SUPERVISE

Do not leave young children 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, safety and supervision during play between children and dogs is possible.

Case Example: 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, who weighed 10lbs, and was scared, 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.

Case Example 2: 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 between *Yours, Mine and Ours, Awareness Centered Training-ACT*.

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. It will set the child and dog up for a trusting relationship.

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, walking on your kitchen table, or sticking their head in a toilet, you would stop them 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. Redirecting to a more positive activity, like a child with their game and the puppy with their toy on a dog bed or in a crate, is safer and wiser.

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? Teach *Doggy Diner, Awareness Centered Training-ACT*. If you feed your dog 2X a day, you have 14 training opportunities every week to teach watch-me, sit, down, and gentle while doing what is natural and meaningful to the dog – feeding. Use these boundaries with play, going out, in the car and on dog walks.

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. Have the puppy/dog sit, wait, and have the child drop a delicious morsel into the bowl. When hand-feeding, palm open and try to have the child stand still.

If you have an adopted pup/dog, please practice this when NO CHILD is around to imitate you. Hopefully, any dog that is placed 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. These are warnings from the dog saying, "I'm scared, stay back." Increase the Spatial Bubble, Awareness Centered Training-ACT. 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 evaluated by an experienced behavior coach. Most dogs need to learn to accept children and adults near their resources (coveted objects like toys, bed, crate). Some never will, so management is essential.

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.

Be kind and respectful, and teach the dog to do the same with trust. You are the provider of the dog's life rewards – all pleasure. You 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 engaging in positive ways like gentle grooming, toenail cutting, and massage. Pet them 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" and "drop-it". *Object Exchange, Awareness Centered Training-ACT* will help. This teaches the dog to drop something in exchange for something else building trust. It keeps the wiggly hands away from the puppy's mouth until they learn "gentle".

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 children and dogs engage respectfully without injury. Most children get nipped running straight up and into a dog's face. Greetings should be calm, with the dog in "SIT". Appropriate greetings, dog-to-dog or human-to-dog - is side-ways, not frontal.

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Click on dog talk media and pick up a copy of Awareness Centered Training – Act by Maureen Ross, MA, published in 2012 by Balboa Press, a division of Hay House.

Enjoy the Journey!