

Kids & Canines

How do dogs fit into families with children?

It's tempting to think that children and dogs go together like peanut butter and jelly. However, the reality is it takes a very special dog to live safely and happily with a child. You can help to keep everyone safe and happy by following the one key rule about Kids and Canines: never leave a child and dog alone together without close supervision.

Dogs are social animals and can live in families very happily. The family becomes their pack. However, dogs do not understand the human social order. In order to meld your dog into your family, you need to think more like your dog and see the world from his point of view.

How do puppies and children interact?

Puppies explore the world with their mouths and teeth.

- A puppy does not know that a child is not just a strange looking puppy.
- A puppy doesn't know the difference between something that is his and something that belongs to the child. As far as the puppy is concerned, everything within reach is fair game for exploration. This includes dog toys, children toys, socks, clothing and even the child.
- The child may respond by grabbing at the toy or item, crying or becoming angry like she would with another toddler. The behavior is intended to get the item back. Unfortunately, the puppy may interpret it as a game of tug or a new game and become rougher in his play.



Children explore the world with their hands.

- A child does not know that a puppy or dog has teeth and will use them.
- A child tends to want to hug the big furry thing, poke at him with her fingers and to pull on the pup's hair, ears and tail. That can hurt!
- The puppy will respond by yelping and/or nipping at fingers like he would to another puppy who played too rough. The bite is intended to make the poking or pulling stop. Unfortunately, a child's skin is more fragile than puppy skin and a nip can draw blood.

Miscommunication: As you can see, there are lots of opportunities for unintentional consequences when you have young children and puppies. Children don't understand that a puppy or dog needs their own space and generally doesn't like to be poked and pulled on.

How do adult dogs and children interact?

Adult dogs who have not grown up or have not had positive interactions with children can be intimidated or become over-stimulated by children. Adult dogs each have their own personality and opinions about interacting with children.

Dogs who chase: Dogs naturally want to chase moving objects and running, noisy children can spark that behavior. When the dog catches the child he may knock her down and playfully nip at her. This is typical dog play behavior, but it does not mix well with unsupervised children.

Dogs who are afraid: Some dogs are afraid of children and will try to run away when children approach. This behavior may encourage the children to chase the dog. If the dog gets cornered and frightened he will snap at what is scaring him. Or a dog may actively try to move the child away from him by growling or snapping.

Dogs who are bossy: An adult dog may view a child as a puppy who needs to be kept in line. If a puppy behaves inappropriately, such as grabbing or nipping at the adult, the adult dog will snap at the puppy's muzzle, sometimes making contact and sometimes not. Even if contact is made, the bite rarely draws blood. It teaches the puppy to stop the behavior. Unfortunately, sometimes an adult dog may do the same thing to an unruly child, but the consequences can be much more traumatic.

Dogs who prefer adults: Often an adult dog will be fine with adult humans but can be unreliable with children. He may become possessive of toys or food or other objects.

What makes a good family dog?

The word that best describes the good family dog is tolerant. As you search for a good family dog keep that word in your mind, whether he is a puppy or adult dog.

Things to look for in a puppy:

- You should be able to handle the puppy (feel his ears, paws, pet him) without him getting perturbed. He should also relax as you cradle him in your arms.
- He should want to follow you around, rather than go off by himself.
- If you make a sudden movement he shouldn't cringe in fear or launch himself on you, he might back away, but should recover and approach you when you invite him.
- He should like to play with toys and balls.
- He should look and feel very "floppy," rather than stiff and tense.
- If he mouths you (which will probably happen) yell "ouch" and he should stop or back up. If he gets more excited when you yell or increases his biting activity, he may not be a good choice.

Things to look for in a adult dog:

- Look for similar behaviors as listed for the puppy above.
- He should tolerate handling of all body parts (ears, paws, looking in his mouth, etc)
- He should never put his teeth on your arm, even gently, while you are handling him
- He should want to be with you and not wander away while you are trying to get to know him.

What makes a good family dog?

- **Manage the environment:** Make sure you can separate your dog from the children when you can't watch them. Crates, x-pens or baby gates are great management tools.
- **Training Play:** Each puppy to play with appropriate objects, such as toys and balls, rather than hands or arms.
- **R.E.S.P.E.C.T!** Teach your children to respect your dog as a living, breathing, feeling creature.
 - Remember that a dog, especially a puppy, explores the world with his mouth
 - A dog will bite if he feels afraid or trapped, so always allow sufficient space for a safe retreat.

