

BowWOW!

Facts, observations and musings about Our Best Friends

Kids and Dogs: a Common Sense Approach (Part One)

Often when a family is considering adding a dog to the household I am asked, “*What kind of dog is good with children?*”. Unfortunately, no breed comes with a guarantee of kid safety. Often my response to that question is one of my own—“*how are your kids around dogs?*” Not addressing this openly could result in children getting bitten and dogs being blamed unjustly.

A dog’s temperament is inherited, then modified by events in his life and proper training. Certain breeds and certain bloodlines within breeds are friendlier, more tolerant and more adaptable to training because they were bred to be that way. A responsible breeder puts emphasis on developing good temperament. However, if you are looking at a mixed breed rescue dog you have no idea of his heritage or his dark history.

Granted, very few bites happen without provocation, but provocation may exist only in the dog’s mind. Dogs are not little people in hairy suits. They don’t think the way humans do; most of their reactions are instinctive. A dog will *react* to a situation unless consistent training and socialization modify his instincts.

Here’s a common scenario: A young child sees a dog she’d like to pet. The dog may not want to be petted. Dogs instinctively set up an invisible “fight or flight” boundary around themselves. When someone unwelcome enters a dog’s boundary, he has two choices—he can run away or he can defend himself. His first reaction may be to simply walk away but he may also show displeasure by giving a warning, often a low growl. A growl is the dog’s way of saying “Back off!”.

If the little girl continues her mission to love on the dog, intruding well into his safety zone and he has issued a warning with no response from the girl, the dog (in his mind) has no other recourse. He bites. A child’s innocent action can be provocation to bite when seen from the dog’s perspective. Running, screaming, darting quickly can also trigger an instinctive predator-prey reaction in some dogs. Children who roughhouse and wrestle with dogs unknowingly encourage them to use their teeth. Dogs equate this kind of activity with dog-on-dog play where using teeth is allowed. Startling a sleeping dog or petting him when he’s eating can also provoke a snap.

What can be done to prevent an “unfortunate incident”? First, it’s essential to understand that *any* dog will bite under the right circumstances. A dog is a dog and behavior can never be predicted with 100% accuracy no matter how friendly

or reliable he is. Obedience training and socialization are absolute musts for dogs that will share their lives with children.

Now, for the other side: just as children need to be taught how to be well behaved around other people, they also need instruction in how to be respectful and well behaved around animals. They need to learn which games are appropriate, how to touch a dog properly, how to interpret a dog's body language and when a dog is not to be disturbed. I have frequently insinuated myself into situations in public when I see a squealing, running toddler bee-lining for an unknown dog, little (toothsome) fingers waving enticingly in the doggie's face. If you understand how a dog thinks, that scenario could quite easily develop into a horrifying incident reported on the evening news.

In short, adult supervision is essential. Small children should never be left alone with any dog, no matter how reliable he has been before. It's up to adults to keep kids safe from dogs and to keep dogs safe from children. Kids and dogs are a wonderful American tradition but not one to be taken lightly.

Next week: specific kid behaviors that dogs may perceive as danger.

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