

Kids and Dogs

Creating harmony and friendship to last a lifetime

What do you picture when you think about kids and dogs? Do you picture a Lassie-like relationship, where the dog watches over the child, keeps him safe, teaches him responsibility, and plays ball until they both collapse and curl up together in exhaustion? Or do you picture a dog who nips at the child's pants, knocks the child over when he walks in the door, and chews his favorite toys to pieces?



The reality of it is that the majority of households these days are dealing with the latter. While dogs certainly can be a child's best friend, it often takes a lot of work, patience, consistency, and understanding. Kids can be a dog's best friend or it's most feared enemy. In this article, I'm going to tackle some misconceptions about the relationship between kids and dogs, as well as some solutions you can execute at home to start down the road of controlling the chaos and creating a beautiful friendship between both your 2-legged and 4-legged children.

Misconception #1: My dog doesn't mind my child climbing all over him, riding on his back, and tugging his tail. The truth is, there are many dogs who will tolerate this up to a certain point, but no dog *enjoys* this. I don't know many people love to have their hair pulled, to be poked at incessantly, or climbed all over either. Every dog has a threshold of tolerance and patience, and while some have higher thresholds than others, every dog has his limits. Watch your dog's body language – lip licking, yawning, avoiding eye contact... those are all signs of stress that most people aren't aware of. In addition to how your own dog feels about this, children need to be taught that it's inappropriate to climb all over dogs because while your dog *may* have a high tolerance for this, your friend's dog may not – and this can really set your child up for a bad situation.

Misconception #2: I'm thinking about getting a puppy for my children because I want the puppy to grow up with my children and I want to give my children the experience of raising a puppy. Ok, this one isn't the worst I've heard but if you are thinking about adding a dog to your family, I would highly suggest that you consider all options. The truth is, puppies are equivalent to adding another child to your family! If you aren't ready to raise another child, then I would think twice about adding a puppy to the mix. Puppies need to learn housetraining, self control, house rules. They need to be watched constantly. They nip and chase and very often bark. They need consistent rules and they need someone to not only tell them what *not* to do, but they need people to show them what *is* appropriate. They need to be proactively taught good manners, not something to assume they can just learn over time. The right adult dogs tend to have a lot more self control, they are calmer, more tolerant, and often housetrained. Of course, you want to be sure you choose the *right* adult dog, one who is used to children, is actually housetrained, and is properly matched to the dynamics of your family. If you choose the right dog, you will do yourself a big favor of not bringing the equivalent of another infant/toddler into your home and you will save a life in rescuing.

Misconception #3: I already have a dog and am about to give birth. I haven't done anything special to prepare my dog but I'm sure he will get used to the little one over time. This one is huge and could take up an entire article on its own! Bringing a baby into a previously adult-only household is a huge change that your dog will need to cope with. If your dog has any fear issues, reactive issues, jumps, barks often, has no house boundaries – you are setting yourself and your dog up for a potentially dangerous and chaotic situation. Jumping dogs can knock you over or trip you while carrying the baby. Crying is something dogs often don't tolerate easily, crawling is a new body position, walking toddlers can easily be knocked down, kids who throw toys can be scary for dogs, and I could go on and on. It's very important that you prepare your dog for the arrival of a baby. There are many resources out there for doing so, a few of which I will list at the end of this article.

A few of the many important things to teach your dog:

Go to Kennel: The dog MUST have a safe place to go and ideally, it should be a place where he doesn't feel like he always has to watch his back. A bed isn't ideal as a safe place because it's not as secure. He needs somewhere where he won't be bothered by the kids so no, the kids should absolutely not crawl into the crate with the dog!

During meal time, the dog should either be given a stuffed Kong and sent to his crate or be taught to stay out of the dining room/kitchen, living room at that time. Having a dog underfoot where your children are eating very quickly creates a begging dog, a dog who steals food right out of the child's hands, not to mention a child who knows how to get away with not eating his veggies!

No Jumping: This is a big safety concern when kids are involved so it's definitely worth teaching yours kids how to react to a jumping dog (walk away or freeze and ignore). If the dog is too worked up to respond appropriately to this, that's when it's your job to jump in and remove your dog.

Kids should always be taught not to tease the dog, pull his tail, hit him in frustration, and never approach the dog when he is eating or when he has a bone. If your dog guards objects, it's *imperative* that you seek the help of a Certified Dog Trainer and Behavior Specialist. This is a very dangerous habit for dogs to have when he lives with children.

Because children are unpredictable and often innocently and occasionally forget some of the rules, it's important that you use management to give your dog a safe place to escape to. Seek the help of a professional right away if you see any dangerous behaviors develop, and stay consistent to both your dogs and your children about the rules of their relationship and the rules of the house.

With the proper management, training and relationship building, a dog truly can be a child's best friend!

Further resources:

Living with Kids and Dogs Without Losing Your Mind, Colleen Pelar

Dogs and Storks Program: <http://www.dogsandstorks.com/>

To locate a Certified Trainer and Behavior Specialist near you... www.apdt.com