



Growing up with a dog

How dogs and children can enjoy living together



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Having a dog in the family

There are many bonuses to having a dog as part of a family. Dogs can be great companions and they can also encourage children to develop compassion, understanding and respect for living things. Growing up with a dog may also improve children's social skills with people and caring for a pet encourages childhood responsibility.

It is likely that many households with children will have a dog. Many dogs are considered to be “part of the family” and children quickly understand that concept. What children might not understand is that dogs are a different species.

Children tend to treat pet dogs as their peers; they hug them, try to cuddle them, pick them up and scold them. Children express their affection for their family and friends through very close facial contact, often kissing. Much of this is exactly the opposite to dog social behaviour and your dog may find it threatening. Children – especially toddlers – are still quite clumsy and can inadvertently stand on feet, tug ears, hair or tail, fall on top of or otherwise hurt a dog.

From a dog's point of view, children communicate very differently to adults; they cry, yell, shriek, crawl and run about unpredictably. It is not surprising that dogs find it hard to understand children and even harder to tell them when they want to be left alone.

For these reasons young children are far more likely to be bitten than any other population group.

Research also shows that people are far more likely to be bitten by a dog owned by their own family than an unfamiliar dog. This means that children are in the highest risk group of being bitten by their own family dog.

This leaflet is designed to help provide advice to parents preparing for a new baby as well as offering advice to those who already have children and a dog in their household.



Preparing for a new arrival

A new-born baby is likely to mean big changes in your lifestyle which may have an effect on how you relate to your dog.

For example:

- you may not have time to walk your dog as much, or be hampered by a pram when you do
- lack of sleep might make you a little less tolerant.

None of these things may have a direct impact that causes aggression but they may make your dog more unsettled.

It is a good idea to prepare your dog for the changes before they actually happen, so you can gauge their reaction. Dogs that have no experience of children and babies may take longer to adjust than those who are familiar with them.

Things you can do to prepare your dog include:

- Bring out the cot and pram before your baby comes home so your dog can get used to them.
- Play CDs of the noises that babies make so your dog can get used to hearing them (crying can be worrying for a dog that hasn't heard it before).
- Teach your dog to go and sit on a 'day-bed' (such as a blanket or cushion) where they can relax out of harm's way when you need to look after your baby. Train your dog to sit on the bed giving them a chew when they go there.
The bed should be in the same room as you, but away from where you will be busy with your baby.



What to do when baby comes home

Don't exclude your dog but allow them to see, hear and smell the new arrival, under strict supervision of course. That way, your dog can understand more easily that there is nothing to be worried about. Dogs are bound to be curious.

The little noises that babies make and their uncoordinated wriggling actions can remind some dogs of prey, so it is vitally important never to leave dogs unattended with babies, no matter how safe and friendly you may think they might be.

If you have any concerns over your dog's behaviour and how they may respond to a new child in the home please seek advice from a behaviour expert. Addressing any problems early on will improve your chances of a smooth and problem-free introduction.





Helping children to learn about dogs

Dogs find it hard to understand children and even harder to tell them when they want to be left alone.

For these reasons children should:

- never be left alone in the same room as a dog
- only be allowed close contact with dogs under competent adult supervision
- never be allowed to approach an unfamiliar dog or one that you do not know to be friendly towards children.

Dogs should always have a 'place of safety' to retreat to if they need to get away from a child. If that is their bed, then children should be taught never to approach the dog in their bed and supervised to ensure they don't!

Teach your children never to approach your dog when, for example, your dog:

- is eating or has food
- has a toy or a possession
- is sleeping
- is sick, injured, in pain or even just tired
- has impaired vision or hearing.

For further information on how you can teach your child to relate to dogs to minimise the risk of bites, visit The Blue Dog website: www.thebluedog.org



Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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Understanding your dog's behaviour

It is good to be able to understand and recognise what your dog is feeling. Recognising and understanding these gestures can allow you to respond to your dog appropriately.

Dogs communicate mainly through body language and they have a wide range of behaviours to communicate how they are feeling. They will use these gestures to stop whatever is happening and this is why it is important that dogs are always given somewhere quiet to go to e.g. their place of safety. When they are there, they should be left alone.

If these gestures prove unsuccessful then they may escalate to other more active signals of communication which include:

- the baring of teeth
- narrowing of eyes
- raising of the hairs on the neck and back
- shifting of weight to allow escape
- growling or snarling
- barking or snapping.

If you are worried about the behaviour of your dog, or your dog displays any of these signs around your children, please seek advice from your vet who may refer you to a behaviour expert.

Gestures which show they are uncomfortable in a situation include:

- yawning
- lip licking
- averting their gaze
- turning their head away
- dropping ears
- crouching
- low wagging
- tucking their tail under and rolling over on their back.

Information about finding a vet and a behaviour expert can be found on the RSPCA's website: www.rspca.org.uk/findavet and www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist

Be responsible

If you are thinking of adding a dog to your family, make sure you all know what you are taking on.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, owners have a duty of care towards their pets. This means you will have a responsibility to ensure that you are meeting the welfare needs of your pet so that they are healthy and happy.

This leaflet is based on the RSPCA's *Dog Aggression Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQs) with information provided by David Ryan, Chairman of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors. The advice offered in these FAQs is recognised by the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour Accreditation Committee as reflecting what is accepted as good practice by those working in the field of clinical behaviour in companion animals.



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**The *Dog Aggression FAQs* can be found at: www.rspca.org.uk/dogaggression
For more information and advice on the welfare needs of dogs, visit the RSPCA website
at: www.rspca.org.uk/dogs**