

## LIFESTYLE

# Pawsitively Speaking: Tips for Improving Child-Dog Safety

■ Teach children how to love and respect their canine playmate.

**S**anta Clarita families love their dogs. Some of us even brought a new puppy home for the holidays, for our children to grow and play with. Others rescued a deserving adult dog from the shelter. Adopting a loveable, wriggling bundle of fur is an exciting experience for everyone. But somewhere in-between all that happy commotion, rules and boundaries should be set so that children and dogs can continue to play safely and happily for years to come.

Fido should be taught not to jump up, nip or otherwise potentially injure any child or adult. A professional trainer can help with basic manners and obedience. But your dog isn't the only one who needs training! Children must be taught what's appropriate and what's not when interacting with the dog. In addition to teaching your own children, a quick briefing for visiting kids can prevent accidents. Above all, keep in mind that no matter how well behaved your children are around animals, no small child should ever be left alone with a dog.

Teach your kids to be aware of canine body language. A sudden

stiffness in the body, "hard eye," curled lip, growling, snarling, or raised hackles are a warning to stay away. Ears pinned back against the head or a tail tucked between the legs indicate fear. A dog whose tail is held parallel to the floor and is wagging loosely is usually happy, but if the tail is held high and wags stiffly, it could indicate anxiety or aggression. This lesson will serve your kids well not only with their own dog, but with unfamiliar dogs they may encounter.

Human body language is important as well. Children should never stare intently into a dog's eyes, as a direct stare is a threat in the animal kingdom. Hovering over the dog, or going to pet with a palm-down motion over the dog's head may scare him. Startling or cornering the dog is also potentially frightening, and any dog that is sufficiently scared might bite. Instead, teach kids to approach slowly and gently, holding their hand in a fist below the dog's nose level so he can sniff, then petting the dog on the chest or the side of the face.

With a new adult dog, teach children not to approach while the dog is eating, whether it's a meal

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*Going to the Dogs*



or a bone. Children are, unfortunately, often the first to discover that the dog has a resource-guarding issue. With young puppies, preventive measures are in order. Have your kids approach as the pup is eating and drop bits of cheese, hot dog or other yummy special treats into the dish. This way, the pup equates the approach of kids while he's eating with good things, rather than feeling he must guard his bounty. Also on the "do not disturb" front, teach the wisdom of letting sleeping dogs lie. Never startle a dog that is asleep.

To a five-year-old, it might seem like a great idea to ride Murphy the Lab like a pony, or to sneak up and surprise Tiny the Terrier by pulling his tail. Teach kids to never hit, poke, pull on, or try to "ride" a dog. If the dog is misbehaving, encourage them to come find you rather than trying to discipline the dog themselves. Don't let kids play too roughly with the dog, either. It's one thing for adults to play hard if they can

monitor arousal levels and calm the dog down easily when he's becoming over-excited. Kids don't have that knack, and things can easily escalate, resulting in injury. Even a dog that doesn't mean to can injure a child in rough play.

Most puppies and some adult dogs nip. This is normal puppy behavior. A trainer can help you to curb this habit. In the meantime, teach kids not to flail their arms around or run and scream when Murphy gets mouthy. This is a tough one! Most dogs have a strong "chase drive," meaning that if something is running, their instinct is to chase it. Teach kids instead to "be a tree" by folding their arms, tucking hands in under their armpits, and stand still without looking at the dog. Doing so signals to the dog that all the fun is over, and the dog will often wander away looking for a more interesting playmate.

Take the time to teach your kids these basic rules. Doing so will go a long way toward ensuring a loving, successful relationship for both two-legged and four-legged family members.

*Nicole Wilde runs Gentle Guidance Dog Training, offering in-home behavior modification and obedience training. For more information call 299-5704, or [www.gentleguidance4dogs.com](http://www.gentleguidance4dogs.com).*