



Children and Dogs Together

Living with children and dogs can be rewarding all around: kids learn about being responsible for another creature and considering their feelings and thoughts, and the bond that kids and dogs form can be very strong. The whole family can benefit from living with pets. But kids and dogs (or any animals) aren't automatically going to know how to get along; it's up to parents to make sure the relationship goes well.

Choosing a Dog

It's always important to consider what you're looking for in a dog before you bring one home, but that's especially true when there are children involved.

Should you get a puppy or an adult dog? Puppies and children have a lot in common: they both have lots of energy and learning to do. Puppies need supervision and socialization, housetraining, exercise, and lots of practice to learn good behavior. Taking care of a puppy at the same time you take care of young kids can be overwhelming, and often means that the puppy's early socialization and training are sacrificed--which can mean big problems later.

Puppies have sharp teeth and claws and don't yet know how to play gently. They're also fragile themselves. Puppies and children need to be supervised all the time so that neither gets hurt.

Adult dogs, while they need our time and training to make the transition to a new home, generally fit into the household faster. You can tell quite a bit about an adult dog's personality and tolerance for childlike behavior (loud and high-pitched noises, hugging and handling, sharing their possessions, and so on).

At the Sacramento SPCA, we can help you pick out a dog whose personality might make them a good match for your family.

What breed of dog is best? Some breeds or types will tend to be better at living with kids than others, but in every breed, it's the individual dog that needs to be considered. Look for:

- Friendliness with people of all ages
- Tolerance for noise and physical handling
- Willingness to share toys and food
- Ability to stay calm and regain their composure in exciting situations

Generally speaking, very small dogs (such as Chihuahuas, Yorkshire Terriers, Maltese, or Lhasa Apsos) aren't a good match for kids; they're physically more fragile than larger dogs and often don't tolerate kids' activities and handling well.

Larger dogs that have been bred to work with a variety of people, such as retrievers, can be a better choice. Herding dogs, such as border collies or heelers, sometimes herd kids, chasing them and

nipping at them. Protective breed types can also have trouble with children, especially if they haven't been socialized with them from a very early age.

At Home With Your New Dog

Safety and Supervision: Young kids and dogs can never be left alone together. With an adult there at all times, you can make sure children and dogs are treating each other appropriately.

Teach your children how to handle dogs or puppies. Children need to understand how to interact with your new dog. Show your children how to pet gently and make sure they don't pull the dog's tail or ears. Kids (and adults) like to hug dogs, but dogs don't always like to be hugged; they can find it intimidating. Staring into a dog's eyes is the same, so teach your children not to do it.

If your kids are old enough to hold a puppy, have them sit down first so that they don't drop the pup. Provide your kids with chew toys to offer the puppy; they can help the dog learn what's appropriate for chewing.

When puppies use their sharp teeth on kids or otherwise get rambunctious, children often squeal and pull away--which can get the dog even more excited. Teach your kids that staying calm around dogs and puppies helps them stay calm, too.

Teach your dog how to behave around your kids. Taking an obedience class with your dog will help you learn commands you can use when your dog and kids are together. If your children are old enough to help in the training, that's even better!

Young kids should let adults be responsible for taking toys away from dogs, and should leave dogs alone when they're eating or having a chew session.

Help your dog to be calm when kids are around by rewarding them for calm behavior: sitting, lying down, chewing on their own toys or hanging out on their own bed. Adult members of the family should avoid rough play with the dog, because the dog may be tempted to play in the same rough manner with children.

Make sure your dog has a safe place to go to get away from all the commotion (a comfortable bed in another room, a crate, or an exercise pen, for example). Teach the kids that they are to leave the dog alone when the dog is in the safe place.

If your dog is growling or snapping at your child, you need the help of an experienced behavior specialist. Please call our Behavior Help Line at 916/504-2848.

Look for the following books, available online:

Living with Kids and Dogs by Colleen Pelar (<http://livingwithkidsanddogs.com>).

Raising Puppies and Kids Together by Pia Silvani, Lynn Eckhardt, and Lori Eckhardt

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.