

10 Ways to Help Your Child Overcome a Fear of Dogs (and 1 Tip to Avoid)

Source: WebMD archives

First, understand your child's fear. Spiders, snakes, public speaking -- most of us are a little unnerved by something. And although our logic tells us a tiny bug or a short speech won't actually hurt us "fear isn't rational, says Colleen Pelar, CPDT, CDBC, a certified dog behavior consultant and pet dog trainer, "so rational talk isn't going to help you through your fear." That means the first step to helping your child overcome fear of dogs is to recognize and accept that that fear is there.

Then, watch what you say. Be sure you're not unintentionally creating -- or reinforcing -- a child's fear of dogs with the words you choose. "I've heard people say well-intentioned but awful things to their kids," Pelar says. "Things like, 'Pet that dog under his chin, or else he might bite you,' or a parent will tell their child to ask a stranger 'Does your dog bite?'" Words have great power to inform a child's view of dogs as dangerous, or as new friends to meet, so choose your words carefully.

Take puppy steps. There's no reason to rush your child into face-to-face doggy introductions. You don't need to force them to be around dogs right away, Dennis tells WebMD. "That may backfire and just increase your child's fear." Instead, gradually introduce your child to dogs, starting with picture books, TV, movies, then from a distance, perhaps in a park or sitting outside a pet supply store. "Gradually increase the intensity of the exposure," Dennis says, "but be sensitive to whether any one step is too much for your child. If it is, go back to the previous step." Pelar, author of *Living with Kids and Dogs...Without Losing Your Mind*, shares this opinion. "The biggest mistake I find people make is not going at the child's own pace. We need to let them set the pace, let them say when they're ready to go closer."

Meet an adult dog, not a puppy. When your child is ready for that next step -- getting closer -- find a mellow, adult dog to start with, not a puppy. Like little kids, puppies are unpredictable, wiggly, excitable, and when they're very young "they still have the mouthiness going on," Payne says, and "the last thing you want is for a puppy to run up and give your child a little nip." You can also look for a group that does doggy meet and greets, says Payne, or reading programs where therapy dogs go into libraries. "Situations like that where the child isn't immediately forced to interact are very helpful."

Learn a little doggish. In these early interactions, you'll have lots of time to teach your child about canine communication. "Dogs don't have a verbal language," says Case, author of *Canine and Feline Behavior and Training: A Complete Guide to Understanding Our Two Best Friends*, "so they communicate with facial expressions and body postures." For example, look for that famous doggy smile, which is "mouth open, lips pulled back, tongue sort of lolling, no tension in the face," Case tells WebMD. "It looks similar to our smile and it's an invitation to interact and can be interpreted the same way as you would a smile in humans." To help your child learn these cues, look at a book of photos of dogs, and ask your child "What's that dog feeling?" Pelar says. "Then go to a park and do the same thing, look at dogs and talk about them. That's how I'd start."

Search out dressed-up dogs. As silly as it sounds, kids (and adults) are often far less fearful of canines in clothes, so be sure to point out dressed-up pooches to your child. "I found that if I dress my dogs in bandanas, or put their therapy vests on, it makes a huge difference for kids," Payne says. "And it works for adults too -- the brighter the clothes the better!" Pelar agrees, "I always put a bandana on the dog if we do school visits. Something about the clothing just makes people more likely to approach."

Petting a pooch. Once your child is ready to take the plunge and touch a dog, it's a good idea to keep the pooch occupied and let your child pet the dog's body instead of the more-intimidating head. "You don't want the dog looking at your child because the dog's face is what tends to be scary to kids," Payne says.

Prepare for the sniff and lick. When a child is ready to let the dog interact "parents need to understand that dogs check you out by sniffing you," Payne tells WebMD, so make sure your little one is prepared. "Tell your child 'The dog is going to sniff you, and he might give you a kiss!'" That quick smooch can be a dog's way of giving your child the thumbs up, or the canine way of getting to know you better.

Teach kids manners. Safe and happy interactions between kids and dogs have a lot to do with "teaching kids gentleness and respect at a very young age," Case says. So be sure you teach your little one to never push, hit, or tease a dog, or pull on a dog's tail.

Always ask. Finally, the most important thing: Teach your child to always ask first before approaching a dog they don't know.

One way to not help your child overcome a fear of dogs: Sometimes parents get a dog to help their children overcome a fear of dogs, but doing so is "a bad idea," Pelar tells WebMD. "It's too much, too soon. The dog is everywhere. Even if you have a room where you keep the dog -- which I don't advise -- the child doesn't feel safe in that room."

Instead, if you want a dog around the house, try dog-sitting a neighbor's pooch for a weekend. Just "don't make big decisions and commitments for something that may not work," Pelar says.