

A Checklist for Safe and Beneficial Relationships Between Dogs and Kids

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Behaviorists and trainers know that the majority of problems between children and dogs occur because the dog is afraid of the child. Many of these problems can be avoided when parents are able to quickly recognize the signs of fear in their dog and proactively manage encounters between child and dog so that neither frightens the other or puts the other in danger. All family members should be encouraged to adhere to the procedures on this Checklist so that dogs aren't required to tolerate behaviors from children that annoy or frighten them, and that children remain safe and protected from being injured by the family dog. This Checklist is only a start – add more items that are relevant for your family.

1. Never allow young children and dogs to play together without direct adult supervision. Rough play, chase, or wrestling games should not be permitted.
2. A dog must be allowed to eat without interference from the child. The best choice is to use a barrier such as a baby gate, or to put the dog in another room with the door closed while he is eating.
3. Children cannot disturb the dog while he is resting or sleeping. This means they must be taught not to try and step over a sleeping dog, to NEVER enter the dog's crate whether the dog is there or not, and to not tease or try to wake up a dog that is sleeping on the floor, furniture, bed, or other location.
4. Children are not to feed the dog treats or leftovers. The child should place treats or other food in the dog's bowl OR drop the food on the floor for the dog to pick up. A dog that isn't gentle may inadvertently nip fingers when trying to take food from the child's hand. Conversely, a child may startle when even the gentlest of dogs touches the child's hand to get the treat, causing the child to pull his hand away, resulting in the dog being annoyed, (which could ultimately lead to aggression) or jumping up to get the treat.
5. Children are not to compete with the dog for any item – food or otherwise – that lands on the floor. If the item is something the dog shouldn't have, the child should be instructed to get the parent rather than attempt to prevent the dog from getting the item or trying to take it away.
6. Your dog needs reliable "sit", "down", "come" and "stay" responses. Sit is one of the easiest behaviors to use as an alternative to stop your dog from doing something you don't like. It makes much more sense to tell your dog what TO do, rather than what NOT to do. So, for example, if your dog is jumping on your child, or chasing him around the room, rather than yelling NO, tell your dog to sit.
7. Recognize the body language warning signs that your dog is uncomfortable around your child. The most common ones are:
 - a. yawning, licking his lips, or sudden self-grooming (scratching or licking) as your child approaches or tries to interact with your dog (these are called displacement behaviors)
 - b. avoidance – getting up and purposefully moving away from your child
 - c. signs of fear or submission, which include pulling the ears back, tucking the tail, dilated pupils and wide open eyes, and/or looking away from your child
 - d. threats including barking, growling or baring teeth at your child. Or your dog may become stiff and still in your child's presence.
8. Children are not to correct, discipline, or scold the dog OR attempt to take anything away from the dog. That is left up to the parents.
9. Make sure you are giving your dog plenty of exercise and opportunities for play to compensate for any increased stress that has built up as she learns to co-exist with your child.
10. Give your dog a safe place to go to be away from your child. Children can be exhausting for dogs as well as parents, so make sure your pet has some time to himself when he needs it. Ideally, this should be a place your dog can get to whenever he wants where the child cannot follow. It could be something as simple as a dog bed or a crate, if your child has learned the dog is "off limits" when she's lying there. If you are attuned to your dog, you may recognize when she needs some downtime and can place her in a quiet room and close the door. Or think outside the box to create a space your dog can get to but your child cannot, based on size differences and/or physical or motor capabilities.