

Dog Aggressive Behavior Toward Children
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We recently viewed a very disturbing segment that aired on Dateline regarding rehabilitating dogs who were aggressive towards children. The basic premises of the program were 1) dogs are aggressive toward children because they think children are challenging them for dominance, 2) the way to ensure the child's safety is for the parents to be the 'pack leaders', 3) the proper correction for biting is either to pin the dog to the ground or give him a jerk with a leash and choke chain. Another frightening aspect to the program was watching a trainer advise a parent to place their infant directly next to a dog who had just attempted to bite the trainer when he tried to touch the dog. We believe there are other interpretations to the problem of dogs who are aggressive toward children and alternative methods of resolving it.

The overwhelming majority of the many cases of dogs who are threatening or aggressive toward children we see are motivated by fear. Many family dogs become extremely anxious and nervous when the baby begins to crawl and can invade the dog's personal space. The Dateline segment also mentioned this phenomenon – the more mobile the child becomes the more threatening the dog becomes. However, careful observations of the dogs in the program also revealed fearful and defensive body postures – ears laid back, tails held low and head turned away from the child. These are not the body postures typical of a confident dog who is attempting to maintain a dominant role. Dogs who are defensive and threatening because they are fearful need to be slowly and safely taught to be more relaxed and tolerant rather than taking a confrontational approach with them. In fact, a trainer in the show had been bitten, apparently while attempting to pin the dog to the ground. This is one of many risks associated with such techniques as 'alpha rolls' and 'scruff shakes'.

It is always desirable for dogs to easily and willingly respond to cues from their owners to sit, down, stay, etc., as depicted on Dateline. A dog who is responsive to these cues can more easily be managed around children and potentially dangerous interactions could be prevented. Teaching a dog these behaviors however is not going to help the dog become more tolerant of children. And it is simply not possible for an infant or toddler to assume a dominant role in a relationship with a dog.

Even the best of dogs requires constant supervision when interacting with infants or toddlers. Purposely placing an infant next to a dog who has just snapped at an adult is an irresponsible behavior.

Dog owners who are expecting a baby and have concerns about their dog should seek help before the child is born, rather than waiting until a crisis occurs with their young child.