

Guidelines For Safe Encounters Between Children and Dogs

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With school out for the summer, chances are family dogs will be spending more time with the kids and their friends. While kids and dogs can be good for each other, some guidelines should be followed so that both are safe in each other's company.

First, it is not a good idea to leave young children and dogs alone together, even for a brief time. Things can happen quickly that can put the dog, the child or both at risk of injury.

A toddler can reach for the dog's toy instead of her own, or grab the dog's tail, either of which could result in a snap or bite. An easily excitable dog may jump on a small child and knock him down. Even when a child and dog seem to be getting along well, their interactions should be supervised to ensure that the behavior of neither one gets out of hand.

Second, children should be taught how to behave around dogs. This includes not only treating them with respect by not teasing them, throwing things at them or purposely harming them in other ways, but to also be aware of other behaviors that dogs may be uncomfortable with.

Quick hand movements toward the dog, yelling, running around and roughhousing can cause a variety of problem reactions from dogs. They may want to join in the fun by jumping and nipping, become frightened and snap to keep the children at a distance, or may also bite because they think a child needs protecting.

Third, dogs should be taught how to behave around children. Dogs should have pleasant experiences with children beginning in puppyhood so that they enjoy being around them. Dogs should also be taught to obey basic commands such as come, sit, and down. When positive reinforcement is used, such as a special tidbit, most dogs will respond to even young children.

Fourth, don't assume that just because a dog is good with the children in the family, that she will automatically be accepting of visiting children. Visiting children should be introduced to the family dog gradually, using lots of tidbits and toys, and should always be supervised.

Lastly, children need to understand the importance of closing gates and doors to prevent the dog from getting out. While dogs should be taught not to door dash, it is not realistic to expect all dogs to resist the temptation to leave the yard when a gate is left open. For some families, a lock on the gate may be appropriate.

Summer can be a time for children and dogs to have lots of fun in each other's company, but some preparations and precautions are also in order to prevent problems from occurring.