



# Babies, Children and Dogs

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## Meeting and Greeting a Dog

The correct way to meet a dog that you do not know is to approach side-on, without making direct eye contact. Glancing and looking away is fine. Fearful dogs will find direct eye contact very scary.

Speak to the dog in friendly, engaging tones of voice. If the dog appears to be relaxed, pat your thigh to encourage the dog to approach. If the dog chooses not to approach, do **not** force yourself on the dog. The dog may believe that it has no option but to defend itself against your threatening advances.

Remain at a sufficient distance for the owner to restrain or remove the dog where necessary.

If the owner advises that the dog is not friendly - do not attempt to force yourself on the dog (even though you might want to demonstrate kindness). Once again, the dog may feel forced to defend himself against your advances and if he is fearful of people, you will have knocked his confidence further in his ability to deal with people without using aggression

Parents and children need to learn to identify some canine communications that indicate when a dog is feeling uncomfortable or stressed. When you see these signals, give the dog some space – do not insist on petting him – he doesn't want to be petted by you at that moment. Signs of fear and stress in dogs include:

**Yawning**

**Licking his lips or nose**

**Quick eye movements**

**Heavy panting**

**Looking away from you**

**Leaning/moving away from you**



*Left: Of course, do not even attempt to interact with a dog that is displaying fear or overt aggression. He's pleading with you to leave him alone.*

**It is good advice for parents to teach their children never to approach a dog that is tied-up.**



*Above: Children (or adults) should never approach a dog that is tied-up and unattended by the owner.*

Explain to children when they are old enough to understand, that dogs can feel scared when they are tied-up and can't get away and will sometimes bite. Children may only approach and pet a dog if its owner is present and gives permission; and if the dog *wants* to be petted. Look for the signs that dogs use to try to tell us that they are not comfortable with us. If the dog is yawning, licking his lips or nose, cringing, making darting eye movements or looking away from you or if he is panting heavily or leaning away from you – leave him alone – do not touch him. He's asking you to give him some space. If you don't, he may have to make you go away by behaving aggressively to you.

There are many myths surrounding dogs generally and no area more so than in regard to our children. It is a dangerous misconception that the right way to introduce yourself to a dog is to hold out the back of your hand to the dog's nose. I cannot think of many better ways of getting a nervous dog to bite you! In particular, I fear for the safety of children whose faces are closer to the dog's teeth.

The theory behind this misconception is that the dog can smell whether you are friend or foe. This is absolutely a myth!

Let's keep in mind that the dog's sense of smell is many thousand times stronger than our own - he simply does not need a hand shoved up his nose to scent you. Furthermore, your action of

offering your hand, particularly when reaching in over the dog's head may be misinterpreted by the dog as threatening or aggressive behaviour on your part. The dog may feel the need to defend itself, particularly if he's on lead and feels that he cannot back away from your advances.

These types of misunderstandings can be avoided by desensitising efforts, particularly for puppies during their critical developmental phases. You would start by having someone with whom the puppy or dog is very familiar and confident, interact in a manner that might normally be disconcerting for a canine. The action would then be followed by a pleasant event such as laughter and play or a food treat. The dog or puppy would soon start to feel comfortable and maybe happy with inappropriate human behaviour because he has learnt that it never leads to a dangerous situation, instead it leads to a pleasant event.

#### Good advice:

- **do not pet a dog that is tied up, especially if the owner is not there;**
- **always enquire of the owner if you can pet their dog;**
- **do not reach your hand out to the dog;**
- **do allow the dog to approach you;**
- **do not approach a dog that has ignored your encouragement to approach you; and**
- **stay away from any dog that you feel nervous about.**

## Dogs Can Read Our Body Language

Dogs are masters at reading body language. Well before the dog is interpreting anything from your scent, he will have learnt much about you from your behaviour during your approach, especially if you are not confident - so, do not attempt to pet a dog if you are feeling nervous of the dog.

## Introducing a New Baby

Successfully introducing your new baby to the resident dog, needs to be well planned and much thought about. Read-on for some helpful tips.

### Before the Baby's Birth

If there are to be any new rules applied to the dog because of the new addition to your family, ensure that the dog is living by them, well before the baby's arrival.

Many people decide that the dog will no longer be allowed in the house at all; or perhaps now confined to certain rooms. You may wish to feed the dog in a different location, to increase hygiene levels. Similarly, the dog's sleeping place might need to be changed and dog toys may now have to live outside. Try to anticipate any required changes and implement them as soon as possible, preferably well before the baby's arrival. We do not want the dog to associate the new arrival with unwanted changes in his life!

If your dog has been sleeping in your bedroom, it is a good idea to introduce him to a variety of other sleeping locations as well: outside in the yard, in the laundry with the door closed, crate training, etc. The dog will sleep in an unpredictable location each night; only sleeping in your bedroom two to three nights per week. Ensure the new sleeping arrangements have been established well before bringing your baby home. If your dog does not cope with sleeping away from you, a more gradual approach might be helpful – see separate document regarding the tie-up or restraint exercise.

Is your dog a barker? If so, you'll definitely want to address this issue before the baby arrives. Dog barking is incredibly effective at waking sleeping babies! See separate information document regarding problem barking.

Buy a few extra baby blankets or sheets that can be used for baby at the hospital and in the early days and then use them as dog blankets. Don't wash the baby smells out of them, just place them in the dog's bedding so the scents become familiar.

## Bringing the New Baby Home

A baby wrapped up in blankets and shawls can be a confusing thing to a dog. The noises of a baby can sound like the mews of any baby animal and may stimulate the dog's prey-drive. I personally believe that the baby should be partially unwrapped and the dog allowed a controlled investigation. Do not follow this procedure unless you have confidence in your dog and can remain calm and relaxed. If the dog senses your anxiety, he may connect this with the baby and an unpleasant association may begin to form.



## Before the Baby Becomes Mobile



Having implemented any changes to your dog's life and routines before bringing the baby home and not introducing radical changes after the baby's arrival, life will progress pretty much as usual, for your dog. Until... the baby becomes mobile!

Your dog can simply ignore the new arrival while the baby is stationary. Instead, use this time more productively, to build a good association in the dog's mind towards your little one. Whenever you are doing something with the baby such as feeding, bathing, nappy changing, cuddling, etc, have some tasty treats on hand for the dog. Toss the dog a treat every 20 to 30 seconds to begin with, gradually lengthening and varying the pauses between rewards. The dog will come to associate your being involved with the baby as very rewarding for him.

Tiny fingers will manage to poke eyes, pull ears and get caught up in longish fur coats, during discovery tours. Try to protect your dog from the worst of these but also prepare him for these atrocities. When the baby is not with you, entangle your own fingers in your dog's coat, causing a gentle tug; reward his tolerance with immense praise,



petting and a treat. Gradually increase the intensity of the tug and turn it into a game - so that the dog comes to see the tugging of his coat as a strange, but regular interaction with humans. Try the same technique with ears, tail, etc.

Have your dog become conditioned to your weight against him, gently at first, then work up to suddenly putting pressure on him. Once again, we will have prepared the dog for minor accidents by your child. Hopefully, when these unexpected incidents happen, the dog will not feel quite so alarmed and perhaps a bite will be avoided.

NB. This type of conditioning should take place with all puppies between ten and 16 weeks of age. Puppies learn that humans can be very odd and play some pointless games, but they're relatively harmless!

## Food Guarding



We would like to feel confident that if our children happened to approach the dog while it was eating, the dog would good-naturedly, tolerate the situation, without displaying any form of aggression. We need to understand the dog's natural instincts and behaviour in regard to food.

In canine law, possession is nine tenths of the law. Any member of the family is entitled to guard food in his possession against any other. This is why a dog is highly unlikely to growl at you while you are standing up with the food bowl, but the moment you place it on the ground, he will consider it to be in his possession and feel entitled to guard it from you. Should you reach out to take the food bowl whilst it is in the dog's possession, you will risk being bitten. However, once you have possession of the bowl again, the dog will behave in what seems an apologetic manner.

Having ignored the dog's attempts to warn you off; next time you to attempt to steal the food, he may feel a need to escalate that warning!

Conversely, you may be able to successfully intimidate the dog into not growling at you when you approach the food. But think ahead: the dog will not feel intimidated by a crawling baby or young child and because you have taught the dog that humans are indeed a threat to food in his possession, the baby or child is placed at risk.

Let's look at the situation from the dog's point of view and use our understanding to alter the idea in his mind as to what our approach to the food signifies. Do not teach the dog that you are a threat to the food by attempting to take it when he tries to warn you off. Do not scold the dog. Heed the warning and do not approach any closer. This way your dog can feel comfortable that he does not have to escalate the warning.

Place only half of the dog's meal in the bowl, reserving the yummiest bits: steak fat, leftovers, etc. Place the dog's bowl on the ground in the usual manner and move away. Return to the dog with more food in your hand before he has finished the food in the bowl. The moment you detect any warning such as tensing up or growling; stop where you are. Toss the food into the bowl. Repeat the sequence.

It will depend on the dog's past experiences as to how long it will take you to be able to approach the dog at his food bowl before he feels concerned.

Aim to achieve the ultimate result of being able to pet the dog and even move his food bowl, without him becoming concerned. (Start by always giving him further yummys after each occasion he has tolerated your petting or touching the bowl). Of course, this type of training needs to be carried out by an adult. Only when the dog is absolutely reliable, would you consider introducing a child to the scenario. And then, tie the dog on lead so that he can reach the food bowl and no further – your child is then provided with a safety gap.

If aggression around food is a problem you might also consider increasing the number of meals presented to the dog each day, so that food is devalued as a resource, reducing the dog's need to guard. However, this is not going to solve the problem.

It is helpful, to have the child give the dog his meal each day, to assist establish a pleasant association in the dog's mind towards the child. To start building on a great association from day one, your new baby could be included in all activities that the dog finds pleasant.

Of course, teaching the puppy during critical phase that he does not need to guard his food or other possessions from us could prevent all of this. A good puppy class will address this subject. Better still, a good breeder will have given the puppies good experience in this respect before they go to their new homes.

## How should my children interact with dogs?

Keep in mind that most dog bites occur in children in the age group 0 to 9. Most commonly, the dog is scared and is defending itself; or alternatively, it believes it has a right to discipline the child.



Also understand that children of four years of age or under cannot correctly interpret dog warnings such as growling, lifting of the lips, hackles raised, direct eye contact, cringing, etc.

Ensure that your dog is confident in your intentions and trusts you. If you have been using aversive techniques, particularly those that involve intimidation or aggression on your part, to ensure the dog's compliance, your dog may transfer feelings of distrust towards your children.

Teach your dog how to “settle”: increasing his tolerance levels in the process. Settling exercises include: tie-up or restraint exercise, crate training, sending the dog to bed, “parking” the dog (standing on the dog's lead to restrain him – he can sit, stand, lay-down, but cannot jump on you or others). Remember to provide plenty of exercise and stimulation for your dog through off-territory walks, training, chew toys, meals in toys, scatter feeds, retrieve and tug-o-war games. He'll then be more capable of settling on request.

Teach your dog how to play with humans and the rules involved. Retrieve and tug-o-war and variations on these games are great. Playing is the most effective way of nurturing the human – dog bond. The dog must learn the rules of the game:



1. He must not grab or lunge for the toy; he must wait for the cue, YES.
2. He must give up the tug toy on the cue, LEAVE.

If your dog is not playing by these rules, seek further advice. These two rules will greatly assist in ensuring your dog is safe for your child/ren.

Give your dog a place to go to get away from your children: a bed or crate, another room or the backyard. If you can see your dog has had enough, send him or take him to his place and ensure the child/ren leave him alone. Explain to the child/ren what is happening. Some families will be fortunate to have a dog that can never get enough of the kids, but it is unrealistic to expect every dog to be this way.



Never believe that your dog is "completely reliable" with your child/ren. There can be many reasons why a dog bites a child: the dog may be in pain (perhaps unknown to you), the dog may feel threatened in a particular situation and act defensively, many dogs will react defensively when suddenly woken, or when something has seriously startled them.

**PLAY SAFE - ALWAYS FULLY SUPERVISE CHILDREN AND DOGS DURING ANY INTERACTION**



**DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!**

This dog cannot get away from the child and is indicating great discomfort with the situation. If the child is bitten, it will be the fault of the supervising adult.

As your child's understanding increases with age, make an ongoing commitment to educate them in the handling of their own pets and also the appropriate interaction with other people's animals.

In particular, approaching dogs that are tied up - a dog can be at his most defensive in this situation. Always check with the owner and supervise the situation. Try to encourage the child to stroke the side of the dog's face, rather than reaching over the top of the dog's head. Teach your

child/ren the signs that dogs give to indicate they are scared or aggressive, to enable your child/ren to keep themselves safe.

A nervous child may gain confidence in stroking the dog's back while the owner holds the dog's head. Placing the dog into the DOWN STAY position may also help in this respect. This dog must be very experienced and confident with children. Whilst we demand the dog's respect, ensure that the child learns to respect the dog!

No child deserves to be bitten. If your dog is behaving aggressively towards your child, you need to question if it is worth putting the child at risk while attempting to work at the dog's problem? In my opinion the answer is NO!

