

KIDS & DOGS: STAYING SAFE

We receive many calls at the RSPCA Qld from parents concerned about how their dogs are behaving towards their children. The calls range from concerns about mouthing and nipping behaviours to serious bites.

Statistics say that most dog bites occur to children under the age of 5 years and most are from a dog who is KNOWN to them and occur in the home (Kidsafe QLD 2006).

The truth is that the statistics of dog bites on children are horrific and the mental damage can last a lifetime.

The following information will help give you the knowledge to prevent such situations from occurring, and how you can create a safe and happy family home involving your 4 legged friends.

Dispelling the myths

A dog's tendency to bite depends on several interacting factors:

- Genetics
- Early socialisation
- Learning experiences
- Education and training
- Physical and mental health
- Behaviour of the person

Because of so many factors involved, measures such as breed specific legislation are inappropriate. ANY dog can bite.



Teaching children how to pat animals

Encourage your children from as early as possible to respect all life. Encourage them to investigate cautiously. Teach them to pat a soft toy gently using the **back of their hand**; show them how to pat with long gentle strokes not a short up and down motion. Using the back of the hand is much less invasive for the animal; it also prevents curious fingers from latching onto fur and using it as a finger hold to hoist one-self up with.

Use a toy to discuss various body parts like eyes, ears, tails and paws, relate this to your child's eyes, ears, hair and toes.

Play a game patting each other on the back, shoulder, or tummy, then try the head, and toes. Use long slow strokes and short pats, see which feels better.

Explain that if an animal likes the way you pat it, they will stay longer. You can also play a great tickle game, respect your child when they have had enough and show them when you have had enough by moving away. Point out that this is how animals can show they have had enough....by moving away.

Some general rules

- Never leave your child unsupervised with an animal no matter how well known.
- Dogs do not like hugs and kisses! Teach your children that hugging and kissing dogs is inappropriate.
- Never allow your children to approach an animal while they are sleeping, explain that animals wake up cranky if their nap is disturbed.
- Never allow your child to run at an animal, encourage them to sit and get the animal to come to them.
- Never allow your child to approach an animal who is eating or has food near them.
- At a different time encourage your child to offer some food to the animal by placing it on the ground then stepping back, standing still and watching.
- Get your children to practice the same commands you use, and show them how to reinforce that command, with a treat. Let your dogs know that you want them to respond to your children's directions, and that you are prepared to step in if your dog gets too pushy.

Crate training

Your dog should have at least one space where they can go and get away from the hustle and bustle of family life. Dogs can feel stress too, and just like us need space to get away from it all (just as we like to retreat to a nice hot bath, or curl up with a book).

A crate is a great idea for dogs, and not a 'doggy jail' as many people think.

Your kids should be taught not to bother a dog in their crate or resting spot.

Refer to our "benefits of a crate trained dog" and "crating for management" info sheets for great tips on how to set a crate up for success and how they can work in with family life.



Teaching dogs about children

Dogs should be taught that having children around is a positive thing. You should take your dog to formal training classes where they use positive reinforcement methods and are family friendly (such as at the RSPCA Qld). Dogs should be taught by adults first, and then children instructed and supervised.

Teach your dog from a young age to accept being handled all over their body including their tail, ears and feet. Reward your dog for accepting the touching with food treats. This is an important exercise for husbandry procedures and going to the vet for example, but equally important if children touch your dog a little rough at times, hopefully only accidentally.

Dogs should be taught to respond to simple clear commands from children such as 'sit' and 'down' with children no more than 1 metre away from the dog.

Teach your dog that children are the source of all good things such as playing games and giving treats. This way they are far more likely to accept accidental rough handling or touching.

Supervise, Supervise, Supervise

We are always told to supervise children and dogs to make sure 'nothing happens'. But realistically, incidents can happen in a split second, and you can't supervise 100% of the time. This is where home management comes into play. Use crates and baby gates to separate your children and dogs if you know you can't supervise adequately. Supervision means **active supervision**. You need to be actively supervising all interactions between your kids and dogs which means being there. It is not enough to be watching from the kitchen window washing dishes, while your children play with the dog in the back yard.



Canine body language

Learning to read your dog's body language is vitally important if you want your supervision to be effective. Dogs indicate stress in many subtle ways such as showing the whites of their eyes, turning their heads away and lip licking. Learn what is normal for your dog/s and what their stress signals are. If you can learn to identify the more subtle signs of stress your dog shows, this puts you in a very effective position for your kids and your dog/s. Some dogs can tolerate only so much before they show more overt signs such as growling and snapping. For more information refer to our "canine body language" and "growling" info sheets.

There are three categories of interactions between kids and dogs

- **Enjoyment**
 - Things are going well. Your dog's body language is relaxed and your children are being appropriate. Continue to supervise. While there is no need to intervene at this stage, be prepared to. Enjoyment can turn to tolerance very quickly.
- **Tolerance**
 - You have noticed some stress signals from your dog and things look a bit tense. How can you improve the situation? Could it be as simple as asking your children to move away, or calling your dog to you? Be prepared to intervene if you can't improve it.
- **ENOUGH**
 - Intervene immediately. If you don't, things could go bad and your child **will** get bitten. Your dog has had enough and is looking for a way out. Separate your kids and dog/s and give your dog some time and space to relax. Think about how you can prevent this situation from occurring again.

Appropriate play around dogs

Many bites occur when children are playing around dogs. Children can be noisy, rough, unpredictable and uncoordinated! They can be unaware that their actions are threatening or scary to a dog. Discourage rough and inappropriate play around dogs.

During such play, put your dog in their safe zone or crate with a chew or keep them on a lead and reward them for calm behaviour.

As parents, be aware that as children become more coordinated on bikes and tri-cycles, they appear more 'prey' like to your dog, this may instigate chasing or barking behaviour in your dog. This is a great time to teach your dog to have some quiet time and reward for calm behaviour. If you have visiting children zooming around on bikes (especially ones with plastic wheels) give your dog some time on his own to chill away from the noise.

Mouthing and nipping at children

Dogs can get very excited around children and can often get reinforced for jumping, mouthing and nipping as children can easily reward this behaviour by squealing and jumping around, which excites the dog even more! The intention of most dogs in this scenario is to play, however many dogs don't understand just how dangerous their size and teeth can be to small children! Supervise all interactions with your children and dog and interrupt before the scene gets out of hand. Teach your children what you want them to do if the dog mouths or nips at them:

- Stand still, don't look, speak to or touch the dog
- Cross their arms on their chest and turn around
- Teach your children to redirect the dog's attention away from them by throwing a toy, or giving a treat for sitting on cue.
- If the dog still tries to jump and nip or mouth, YOU need to intervene and ask your dog to sit and be calm or ask your dog calmly to come away and settle them in a crate, mat or safety zone.
- DO NOT get angry or reprimand your dog or puppy for the mouthing or nipping behaviour as this will only excite them more, teach them to be afraid of you, create negative associations with the children (when I play with them I get into trouble) and not teach them what you want them to do.

Involving your kids and dogs - fun games to play

Kids 6 months - 2years

Hide with your child and your pets can find you
Dropping food from high chairs - use pieces of apple, carrot, cooked pasta etc

Kids 3-8 years

Fetch
Hide and seek
Blowing bubbles
Come when called games

Kids 9-13 years

Training classes with adult supervision

Fetch
Trick training
Running races

Come when called games (all family members sit in a circle, call the puppy by name treating the puppy when they come to the person who called them. Everyone else should look skyward and hide their treats. Soon the dog will respond happily to their name.



No matter how responsible, children under 12 are not developmentally capable of being in sole charge of a dog (size is not important), so don't send them out to walk the dog. Children can help and should be encouraged to participate in your dog's daily care, training and play, but ultimately it is the adults of the house who have the responsibility.

Teaching calm

An important task is to teach the dog and the kids to be quiet and calm together. So practice and reward this frequently. Use crates and safety zones and teach children that the dog is not to be disturbed when in this area. Also teach the dog to be on its own and entertain itself appropriately. Use food toys like 'kongs' or treat balls to help the dog settle, or a raw meaty bone. Refer to our info sheets "entertaining your dog", "kongs" and "treat dispensing toys".

Teach your dog what is expected of them in each and every situation before they have a chance to experiment with the 1000's of inappropriate things they can find to entertain themselves.

For more information on teaching your dog to settle inside the house, refer to our 'Inside dogs v Outside dogs' info sheet.

Dog parks

If you take your dogs and children to the leash free park, teach them all to be respectful of all other dogs, they may not be well socialized to people. Leash free parks are not an appropriate place for children of any age to run around, it makes them too vulnerable to being knocked or unintentionally injured.

Strange Dogs

- No matter how well you know another dog, it doesn't mean that it will like your children.
- Never approach a dog that is tied up.
- Never allow children to approach a dog on the other side of a fence or gate.
- If there is no human, don't approach, when there is an adult present always ask permission and follow instructions
- Teach your children to stand to one side of the dog, hold their hand out with a closed fist knuckles up. Let the dog sniff the hand then let the child gently stroke the chest or closest shoulder of the dog.
- Do not reach over the dogs' head.

If you are approached on the street or in a park by a dog that is off lead; teach your children to stand still cross their arms and be quiet. Squealing and crying or sudden movement can excite a dog, causing them to jump. If you are present teach children to turn their face towards you.

In conclusion

There are many benefits for children sharing the lives of pets. Pets can teach responsibility, encourage exercise, aid in childhood development and teach life lessons to name just a few! Help keep the relationship between your children and dogs a special one by following the information above.

Remember, teach your dogs and your children how to be appropriate, learn to read your dog's body language and when to intervene to make sure everyone stays safe!

If you are planning a family or already expecting a baby and have pets, refer to our info sheet "Introducing your pets to your baby" for some great tips.

References and more information

The RSPCA Qld Animal Training and Behaviour Centre hold regular seminars on staying safe with kids and dogs. Keep an eye out on the website for dates. www.rspcaqlld.org.au

Kidsafe QLD (2006) *Dog Attacks fact sheet*, Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Australia, Kidsafe Qld

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<http://www.ourwonderfulpets.com/katrina/posts/38-benefits-of-pets-for-children>

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Victorian State Government (2012) *We Are Family* Department of Primary Industries, Victoria, Australia
<http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/pets/environment-and-community/we-are-family>

Yin, Dr Sophia (2012) *The Art of Science and Behaviour* <http://drsophiayin.com/>. This is an excellent website with lots of practical advice on body language and recommended resources. You can also download some great posters on dog body language and greeting dogs.