

Teaching Your Dog to Tolerate and Love Children

by **Minette** | May 30, 2011



Kids Love Dogs!

We live in a world full of children. It always surprises me when child aggressive dogs at shelters are placed in “child-free” homes. Even for those of us who don’t have children...we have children in our lives. Nieces, nephews, friend’s children, step children they are everywhere and cannot be constantly avoided. Dogs that are seriously child aggressive should be seen by a Veterinary Animal Behaviorist so that they can be controlled safely and under the watchful eye of a veterinarian/behaviorist.

Dogs must be taught first to tolerate children, and then hopefully to love children! **Socialization** should begin early and lots of time should be spent with good kids to help endear them to your dog.

Children are loud, they move fast, they make strange noises and sometimes they engage in behavior that dogs classify as rude and obnoxious. Unfortunately, that is just how children behave and it is difficult to control all the children that your dog will meet so although I do recommend educating and arming children with good doggy social skills, it is also imperative that dogs are subjected to the world of children in a fun and positive way.

I spent 34 years of my life without children under my roof, but there was always the occasional child that made an entrance into my house. My dogs had to be taught to enjoy the company of children even though sometimes dogs think kids are a little scary.

I have always used early socialization, with good children as a crucial tool. Poorly behaved children and those with no dog social skills can scare a puppy and therefore affect how it feels about children

for a long time, if not for life. So, I would never recommend taking your dog to Chucky Cheese for a free for all, but I do recommend visiting friends and family who have good, well-mannered kids.

Early interaction and respect are essential for both children and dogs in order to have successful life relationships.

I also desensitize my dogs to the rude things that children do in order to prepare for the day they meet a poorly behaved, uneducated child. Although, you may think you can keep these children from your dog, you are probably wrong! There are hyper, naughty children in this world that don't listen to anyone and I would rather give my dog the tools to deal with them, than deal with the ramifications of a bite!

I use positive reinforcement to teach my dog's tolerance with a little rough handling and what dogs consider rude behavior.

My background is working with Service Dogs for people with disabilities and therefore taking them into public all of the time. Service/Assistance Dogs get grabbed, stepped on, kicked, yelled at, poked and prodded almost constantly. They must be understanding about all the negative things that happen to them to be successful in their field.

I learned early on to teach my dogs that when bad or painful things happen, they would be rewarded by me for good behavior instead of reverting to their instincts to nip, growl or bite. And, I continue to raise my dogs to be tolerant of uncomfortable touch.



Getting Started

What You Need

- Make sure you have excellent treats! You want your dog to enjoy this!
- Clicker
- A fun and positive attitude

How to Train Your Dog to Accept Uncomfortable Touch

- First you have to begin by starting small! I don't want to hurt or scare my dogs that would defeat the purpose! I want to start by being slightly irritating and reward my dog for a correct response.
- Gently I touch their ears, feet, snout etc. and click. Touch should equal something good.
- As long as I see no signs of aversion, I move to the next step of adding more pressure or irritancy.
- This time I hold the ears and paws just a little too long. I poke a little harder, but I click, and Jack got a good response.
- Use lots of praise and rewards, this should be a game and should be fun for you and your dog.
- Don't do this for long periods of time; this type of training should be done in short positive bouts.
- Next, add a little more pulling and/or pressure, click and treat.
- Work up slowly by increasing the level of discomfort and increasing the praise and rewards. Think of a three-year-old grabbing your dog's ear or fur, you want your dog to be used to this sensation and understand that a wonderful reinforcement for good behavior is on its way!

Once while I was out training a Service Dog at a flea market in Denver, CO I experienced the exact reason I desensitize all of my dogs. We were meandering through the flea market shopping and enjoying ourselves when my Service Dog started to act a little weird. He never broke heel position, but the look on his face was odd, and for a moment it didn't go away.

I turned around to see a 4-year-old boy pulling and what almost looked like water skiing from his tail. I could tell the pressure was uncomfortable if not painful. I couldn't even see the youngster's parents and he ran off never to be seen from again.



Kids and Dogs can Form Wonderful Bonds Together!

My dog simply looked up at me with wanting eyes as if to say "I SOOOOO deserve a treat for that!!", and I had to agree! He was showered with treats for such a tolerant response, and for the next

several training sessions he was rewarded anytime children were around so that he would not hold any resentment.

I wish we lived in a world where all children treated all dogs with kindness and respect, but that doesn't always happen. Kids grab ears, fur, paws, they pull tails, step on, kick, and trip over dogs and I am a firm believer that dogs should be taught to accept these behaviors to the best of their abilities and then expect praise and a treat for a job well done. Instead of wanting to bite, they should want to run to you to get their "cookie"!

This desensitization dog training keeps your children and your dog's safe!

Risks to the Dog from a Child

- Increased stress and anxiety from being chased, poked, and prodded
- Poisoning by ingesting common items such as infant pain relievers, diaper creams, or grapes or raisins a small child drops on the floor or intentionally shares with the dog. Also be mindful of Xylitol in some children's toothpastes (learn more about [which products contain Xylitol](#)) or teething wipes.
- Traumatic injuries, such as broken bones, for which puppies and small breed dogs are particularly vulnerable. It can be easy for young children to inadvertently sit or step on a small dog, or even drop them when standing and holding a squiggly puppy.
- For more information about keeping pets and kids safe together, read "[Pets and Pacifiers – When children and animals don't mix.](#)"

How to Create an Introduction Plan

Each family should create a structured plan that is right for them and their new dog. See my recommended list of five questions to consider as you develop your unique plan in my article "[How to Introduce Your New Dog to Your Other Pets](#)," which also goes over how (and why) you can use tools to help during introductions. Helpful tools include positive reinforcement, pheromones, and walks and playtime to tire out your dog beforehand.

Preparing for the Introduction

Talk to your children about the importance of being calm and gentle with their new pet. Let them know your new dog may be nervous, afraid, or over-excited, and they may not know how to react to their new family.

Explain and demonstrate different types of [dog body language](#) your children should watch out for. You can review and download this great [Doggie Language](#) poster by [Lily Chin](#) for guidance.

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DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier



ALERT



SUSPICIOUS



ANXIOUS



THREATENED



ANGRY



"PEACE!"
look away/head turn



STRESSED
yawn



STRESSED
nose lick



"PEACE!"
sniff ground



"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away



"NEED SPACE!"
whale eye



STALKING



STRESSED
scratching



STRESS RELEASE
shake off



RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes



"RESPECT!"
offer his back



FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body



FRIENDLY



"PRETTY PLEASE!"
round puppy face



"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG!"
belly-rub pose



"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch



"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow



"READY!"
prey bow



"YOU WILL FEED ME!"



CURIOUS
head tilt



HAPPY
(or hot)



OVERJOYED
wiggly



"MMMM...."



"I LOVE YOU,
DON'T STOP"

Teach your children when they need to back away and let the dog have its space and do so before they are introduced to their new dog. Here are a few additional quick tips to prepare for the introduction:

- Make sure your kids, and their clothes, aren't covered in food stains and scraps. You don't want your new dog knocking anyone over in their eagerness to get a taste!
- Make sure you have at least two responsible adults present and engaged during the introduction. One adult will need to focus on the dog, while another (or more) focuses on the kids.
- If you have multiple children, it can be helpful to make introductions with just one or two kids at a time, depending on their ages and abilities to stay calm.

How to Introduce Your Dog to Your Children

Ideally, your children will have met and helped select the dog at the shelter, rescue group, breeder, or elsewhere. This will help start the bonding and give children a “buy-in” to the process. Regardless of whether your children were a part of the initial dog selection process or not, consider these strategies when your new dog finally comes home.

- **Use tricks:** If the new dog knows a trick like “sit,” you can show the kids how to give this cue and then reward the dog with praise or a treat when it responds correctly.
- **Watch out for mouths:** Since your dog may not yet know how to take food treats with a soft mouth, take steps to avoid an accidental nip. Treats can be dropped on the ground rather than given directly to the dog's mouth, given with a flat hand rather than from a fist, or the dog can be taught a “gentle” cue.
- **Be gentle:** Show your children how to pet the dog gently and how to praise the dog when it behaves well. Monitor the dog's body language to make sure that everyone, including the dog, is comfortable during each of these interactions.
- **Take a walk:** Going for a walk through the neighborhood together, as outlined in [dog-dog introductions](#), can be a helpful way for everyone to get comfortable in a neutral environment. This also allows for multiple short interactions through the walk, rather than a single, long interaction at home.
- **Leash up:** When you start allowing less-structured interactions between the new dog and children, it can be helpful to leave a short, lightweight leash attached to the dog's collar for use as a “handle” to regain control quickly and easily if things start getting out of hand.

- **Save toys for later:** Be mindful of toys, long-lasting food items, dog chews, or other objects that might turn a peaceful greeting into a rough-and-tumble play session or upset a possessive dog that is still unsure of their new environment.

Preparing for Future Success with Your Puppy and Children

When should a child be allowed unsupervised time with the puppy?

This is a difficult question to answer without a full description of the many variables at play. As a rule, children should not be left alone with a dog — even the known family dog — without adult supervision. This is for everyone's safety and peace of mind.

Can my kids help with training the puppy?

Absolutely, 100%, YES! When kids are involved with positive reinforcement, non-confrontational/dominance-based training, it is great for everyone. In addition to the clear benefits of training your dog, involving your children will help them develop an empathetic way of communicating with animals and, by extension, other people.

How much involvement depends largely upon?

- The child's age
- The dog's age
- The child's maturity level and attention span

Talk with your trainer to figure out when and how your kids can be involved with training your dog.

Why Dogs Are Good for Children

Whether your new family dog is a puppy or an adult, scientific studies and experience have shown that there are many benefits from having your children grow up with a canine companion. Here are a few:

- **Dogs help teach empathy:** Pets have been shown



to help children develop higher emotional intelligence (EQ), which is a key indicator for the child's success.

- **Dogs keep children active:** Researchers in London found that children with dogs spent more time engaged in physical activity (more than five hours per day, on average) than children without dogs.
- **Dogs reduce children's' risk of asthma:** A Swedish study found that exposure to a dog in the first year of life was linked to a 13% lower risk of asthma in later childhood.
- **Dogs mean less stress and anxiety:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) discovered that children with dogs were about half as likely to test positive for anxiety.
- **Dogs are great reading buddies:** You read that right. A University of California, Davis study confirmed that children who read out loud to their dogs (which provide a nonjudgmental audience and comforting reading buddy) improved their reading skills by 12 percent over the course of a 10-week program.
- **Dogs are a kid's best friend:** This hardly needs citation as anyone who's seen a child with a dog knows how quickly they can become inseparable.

Conclusion

Introductions to your new dog should be an ongoing process, not a one-time, high-stakes encounter. Taking the time to educate your kids and create the right environment will improve safety for everyone and maximize your chances for a loving, healthy relationship between your new dog and your children that will be a joy to watch for years to come. Best of luck and enjoy!

What experiences have you had when introducing a new dog into your home? What's worked? What hasn't? Please share your new-dog-introduction stories and tips with the community in the comments section below.

