

Beth Bradley
Dog Trainer/Behaviorist
(201) 247-8472
www.dog-trainer.biz

Children and Dogs

Often, I am asked to advise families when the family dog begins behaving in ways that are not so family-friendly. Parents call me, confused, when the dog they brought home for their children is behaving less like Lassie and more like Cujo. Unfortunately, television shows and movies have created the impression that kids and dogs just go together naturally. They don't. Both the children and the dog need you, the adult, to teach them how to behave with one another.

When I am asked for my advice on issues with a family dog, my first question is "How are your kids with the dog?" The answer is almost always the same: "My kids love the dog!" Unfortunately, that doesn't really answer the question. What I really need to know is this: Do your children know and consistently follow the rules for interacting with a dog?

What Are the Rules?

You probably started to set rules for your dog's behavior the day he arrived in the home. Rules and training ensure that your dog knows what is and is not acceptable. Without them, your dog's behavior would eventually drive you crazy. Did you remember to set rules for the children's behavior related to the dog? Do your children know what is and is not acceptable behavior with the dog? If not, your children may be driving your dog crazy. Actions that your children might think are funny, playful, or loving may in fact be scary, confusing, or frustrating to your dog. Make sure your children know and follow at least these basic rules for respecting a dog's "personal space."

- **Pulling ears, tails and other body parts is not acceptable. Neither is kicking, pushing, jumping on, “riding,” or hitting a dog.** These actions will frighten and/or hurt the dog. They should not be used by any family member—not in play and not in correcting the dog.
- **Don’t disturb the dog while he is eating and keep your hands out of the dog’s food bowl.** This is a common sense rule about dogs in general that all children should know and follow. Even if a dog shows no signs of protecting his food, bothering him while he eats adds to an overall stress level that can lead to undesirable behavior.
- **Don’t grab the dog’s chew toys—especially from out of his mouth.** You wouldn’t let your child grab a toy away from another child. First of all, it’s just not acceptable. In addition, the child whose toy was grabbed may react in frustration or anger. A dog has the same potential to react—and a much greater potential to do physical damage to the child who grabbed the toy.
- **Respect the dog’s personal space.** A dog’s “personal space” refers not only to his body and his food bowl, it also means accepting that there are times the dog just wants to be left alone. Your dog should have a dedicated space in your home where he can retreat when he wants to get away the hubbub of family activity.

Take the time to observe whether your children are following the rules consistently and reliably. If your children need to be reminded of the rules when you are in the room, they are almost certainly not following the rules when you are not present.

It should go without saying that toddlers and infants should not be left unsupervised with dogs. Your dog doesn’t understand that the toddler hitting him with a toy “doesn’t know any better.” Your dog also doesn’t recognize that a child’s overenthusiastic choke-hold is meant as a loving hug. If something hurts or scares your dog he only knows he wants it to stop.

Dog Bites Child: How Did This Happen?

Many people are surprised when their family dog bites or tries to bite a family member. In the majority of cases, a dog doesn't just suddenly "snap." The aggressive behavior is usually a reaction to something that has been brewing for a long time. You may think your "gentle" dog is "tolerating" having his ears or tail pulled by your child. It might even seem cute how "patient" the dog is. However, it is more likely that the dog is growing increasingly frustrated with being tormented in this way. If the adult does not intervene and relieve the dog's distress, the dog will eventually try to stop the torment on his own. Even a gentle, well-trained dog has a breaking point at which he will react in self-defense.

Is it Temperament or Training?

It may be that some of your dog's undesirable behavior is due to his personality and temperament. Although effective training can change your dog's behavior, it cannot change his temperament. In the same way, you can, with vigilance, ensure that children learn to respect the rules related to the dog. However, if your children are going through a stage where they have difficulty controlling their impulses or if they frequently test the limits of existing household rules, it is likely that they will have trouble following new rules related to a dog.

A trainer can advise you on whether your dog's temperament is contributing to the issues you are experiencing. When I am called on to evaluate problems with a family dog, I sometimes find that the issue is related to errors in training. At other times, sadly, I have had to tell a family that their dog simply doesn't have the right temperament to be around children. However, you are the expert on your family. Is the problem that you haven't yet established the right guidelines for your children or are your children unable at this time to follow the rules and restrictions necessary for safely sharing their home with a dog?

What Next?

Teaching children appropriate boundaries and behavior is often overlooked in the excitement of bringing a new dog or puppy into the home. But it's not too late!

- If you haven't taught your children the rules, do so immediately.

- If your children aren't following the rules, become more consistent about supervising them until they do.
- If your children simply can't follow the rules, or if you don't have the time to supervise until they learn the rules, find another home for your dog.

Remember, the dog did not choose you; you chose to bring the dog into your home. Having a family dog involves teaching the whole family to help meet the dog's needs—including his need to feel safe and secure.