

The Dog – Child Relationship

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I believe one of the most misunderstood areas of dog behavior is the relationship between a dog and a child. Most children who are bitten receive the bite from their own dog or a friend's or relative's dog.

Dogs are pack animals and when they are adopted by a family they become a member of the human pack. They often try to establish their position by challenging members and small children are the most likely to be challenged.

There are many techniques that the adults in the household can use to reduce dominance. I find one of the most important issues is height. Dogs living in homes with small children should not be elevated on beds or furniture. Whenever possible, try to keep children higher than the dog. Small children should not be crawling on the floor with the dog. This places a dog at an equal level.

Rough play and wrestling with a dog should never be allowed. It teaches a dog to treat humans like other dogs. Chasing games teach dogs to run away or to chase and nip children.

Have children play fetch games with the dog and teach an exchange (i.e., a treat for a toy). Always monitor the play between dog and child. Help children do lure and reward-based training. It will help establish respect for the child and a close bond between them.

Adults should desensitize their dog to everything a child might do. Let the dog nibble on a special treat while you handle their ears, feet, tail and face. They should not react in a negative way when you handle them or bump into them. You should use treats to give them a positive association with being handled.

There are some very good books on child-dog relationships. If you are concerned about your dog with children be sure you call a trainer that specializes in behavior. They can help you assess the situation and discern if your dog is fearful or dominant. They can help you reduce dominance and build confidence.

A confident, tolerant dog can be a wonderful companion to your children and teach them responsibility and sensitivity.