

CHILDREN AND DOGS SUPERVISION ... PAWS UP!

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With great applause I am gleeful when new puppy parents ask questions about children with dogs. This can be one of the most precious relationships, where two species learn how to respect one another. Children under 12 years cannot be expected to understand how to interact safely with puppies or newer, adopted dogs.

Supervision is essential to avoid the pitfalls of a puppy accidentally knocking over or nipping a child. It prevents a child from hurting a puppy or dog, which make great friends and playmates but are not toys. They are living beings who feel pain and react to squeals and movement differently than humans do.

Here are precautionary and proactive measures you can take to prevent and protect the relationship between dogs and children, and prepare yourself for any new addition.

1. Is someone physically present, alert and with “eyes on” the child and pet at all times (not around the corner or just in the kitchen)? If not, are the child and pet safely and securely separated from each other by a physical barrier (behind closed doors, dog in a crate or x-pen, child in a crib or playpen)? This is true when adding new pets too. Is that the cat safely secured behind a baby gate with an escape route?
2. Is there a plan to deal with potential distractions (someone coming to the door, cell ringing) and emergencies (the stew on the stove is boiling over) so that child and pets aren't left alone together, even for a moment?
3. Is *full attention* being given to the child and pet, without the supervisor being distracted with text messages, phone calls, TV shows or reading? Full attention provides the safest environment is difficult to achieve. It can be challenging to anyone to devote their full attention to watching pets and babies without doing ANYTHING else, for any considerable length of time – it's physically and mentally exhausting! It may be better for parents and caregivers to take turns supervising or limit the supervised interactions to just a few minutes, then separate pet and baby using one of the methods mentioned in Question One.
4. Is the supervisor proactive in preventing unsafe interactions between pet and child or pets and pets, by teaching safe approaches? Is it a case of reacting to unwanted situations once they have begun like playing games? When a toddler approaches a sleeping dog, does the supervisor recognize the danger and proactively redirect the child **BEFORE** she reaches the dog, or reactively wait until the toddler pulls the dog's tail to intervene? If you (or the supervisor) finds him or herself reacting to more than just a few unwanted situations, then interactions need better planning. Recognizing unpleasant emotions or interactions in dogs take practice (body language).

5. Thinking ahead (proactive), anticipating undesirable interactions (behaviors) and taking action (prevention) before they occur represents the highest level of supervision and prevents potentially dangerous situations from arising.
6. To be proactive and provide the safest supervision, dog and child parents need to be aware when dogs are anxious, fearful or stressed during interactions with a child or other pet. Children will not be aware of this without keen role modeling from parents.

Children and dogs go great together until something happens. It is our responsibility as dog and child parents to understand that they are a different species. They can fill many roles, like friend and pseudo sibling, while doing what any good parent does – teach, role model and communicate fair and relatable guidelines for interactions whether it is a game of sport or playing with our dogs. Same is true for pet-to-pet interactions. Enjoy the Journey!