

Carole Bryant, Naturopath

(ATMS & HATO accredited)

- nutrition • herbal medicine • homoeopathy • flower essences • iridology • craniosacral therapy
- NAET allergy elimination technique • massage • manipulative muscle therapy • kinesiology • reflexology
- Theta Healing • Thought Field therapy • reiki • Neuro-Linguistic programming
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KIDS AND DOGS

Many of us have happy memories of the dogs we had as we were growing up – wonderful easy going, tolerant companions that took everything in their stride.

But that's only one side of the story. Each year there are a large number of children that suffer dog bites. Statistics from 2001 – 2002 showed that Australia wide 16,000 people (of all ages) attended hospital accident and emergency departments because of dog bites. Of those 16,000 people, 2,300 required hospitalisation.

Another study from 1998 provides more specific information. Just over 58% of dogs bites are to children under the age of 14 (23.4 % 0 - 4 years; 19.4 % 5 – 9 year olds and 15.5 % 10 – 14 year olds). Boys suffer 62% of the bites and girls 37%. But don't think these statistics are from roaming dogs. 35% of all dog bites occur in the home (the family dog) while 24% are in other private homes (dogs that belong to friends and family). A further 20% of bites occur on roads, footpaths and driveways.

So the biggest risk to children is from the family dog and other dogs known to the child rather than from strange dogs - almost 60% in fact!

The majority of bites occur on the head and face, the hands, forearms and legs. Because of their small size, many bites to children occur on the head and face, running the risk of permanent disfigurement (apart from lasting emotional trauma).

Why are so many children bitten? Most dog bites happen because neither adults nor children have been educated on how to behave appropriately around dogs and because children are left unsupervised while interacting with dogs.

In case you're now thinking that having children and a dog is just too great a risk, let me give you another perspective. In America (I don't have the statistics for Australia) more children are killed by their parents than are killed by dogs. However, what we would really like is to reduce the risk of injury from dogs to a minimum. So if you already have children and a dog, or you're thinking of getting a dog for your family, how can you help minimise the risk of injury to your child/children?

Firstly, not all dogs are suitable as family dogs. A good family dog that will have to interact with children needs to have an easy going nature and enjoy the company of children (as opposed to just tolerating them) – more on that later. That doesn't mean that a dog should have to put up with whatever a child does to them. What it means is that the most enjoyment and the least risk of having a dog as part of the family comes from first choosing an appropriate dog, combining that with adults and children who are educated on how to behave around dogs, and from supervising all interactions between children and dogs.

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What is a good kid's dog?

What sets a good kid's dog apart is that it is friendly, outgoing and enjoys the company of children (rather than simply tolerating them). Good kids' dogs come in all breeds (and cross breeds), shapes, sizes, colours and can be male or female. However, there are a few guidelines, especially if your children are very young. Very small dogs are easily frightened or injured by children. Very boisterous dogs may also be a poor choice as they can easily knock a child over, while a dog that is nervous or afraid of loud noises or sudden movements is also a poor choice. Definitely avoid a dog that guards its food, toys, bed or other possessions.

A reasonably sturdy dog with an easy going temperament is ideal. What breed? Not an easy question to answer! In the end it comes down to the individual dog. So if you decide on a particular breed, make sure the dog you choose has the temperament and personality you need. If it is a puppy, also look at the temperament of its parents and any other relatives. In a litter of puppies, personalities may range from bold and outgoing, to shy and/or fearful.

Which brings up another question – is a puppy the most appropriate choice? Often the answer is no, especially if you have very young children. A puppy is a baby and needs lots of care. If you aren't prepared to have another baby in the family, don't get a puppy! If your children are older, then a puppy may be appropriate.

Older dogs (young adults or even middle aged dogs) are often an excellent choice. They are already full grown, so no surprises with size and you can assess their temperament and personality. However, you will need to be fairly certain that an older dog has no history of ill treatment etc that may make the dog mistrustful of people. Many animal shelters temperament test their dogs before making them available for adoption so this can be a good place to find a suitable older dog.

No matter how careful you are, there will more than likely be a time when your child accidentally frightens or hurts your dog. A dog that is mistrustful may retaliate whereas a dog that has always been treated well is less likely to react. No matter how careful you are, accidents can and do happen. The key to minimising risk is for all interaction between children and dogs to be supervised by an adult.

If you already have a dog and are about to add a human baby to your family, you will need to assess your dog honestly. If your dog is not suitable as a kid's dog the situation may still be manageable but it will take considerable effort and I recommend that you discuss the situation with an experienced dog trainer.

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The parents' role

Ultimately as parents we are responsible for the outcome of any interaction between our children and the family dog. Pre-school age children should never be left alone with a dog, no matter how trustworthy the children and/or the dog while older children need some supervision up until about age 12.

Parents also need to understand dog body language. Unfortunately this is often misinterpreted and signs of emotional discomfort on the part of the dog often go unnoticed. These signs of emotional discomfort are in fact warning signs and need to be acted upon by the supervising adult. Often we hear that a dog bit without warning, when in fact an experienced dog trainer would have recognised the warning signs and taken steps to prevent the dog's discomfort level escalating to a bite.

The arrival of a new baby can cause problems for an existing dog. Often the dog has been treated as the family's baby, only to find that it has been pushed aside by a new arrival. Not a recipe for a happy relationship between your child and your dog! If your dog is to remain as a family member, it will need to continue to be included as part of the family (although supervised 100% of the time it is with the baby). Better still, make sure that the presence of the baby is associated with good things. For example the dog could be rewarded with a tasty treat for remaining calm when near the baby.

If you feel your dog will not be safe around your baby, change your dog's routine *before* the baby is born. My sister switched one of her indoor dogs to being an outdoor dog when she was 6 months pregnant so that he wouldn't associate his change of circumstances with her baby when it arrived.

And to help you keep everything safe between your baby or child and your dog, some equipment will be really helpful.

Firstly, get a cordless phone. Then you *never* have to leave your children and dog alone together to answer the phone or to keep in touch with friends. Secondly, get some baby barrier gates. These can be used strategically to keep your children and your dog apart when necessary. These are absolutely essential if your dog is a house dog and is not safe with children. The other piece of useful equipment for indoors is a crate for your dog. Teach your dog to enjoy being in the crate and he can be put in the crate whenever he needs to be separated from your children. The crate becomes his personal safety zone.

An outdoor pen/enclosure is also very useful for times when your children and/or maybe visiting children want to play active games in your yard which may overexcite your dog.

Keeping everyone safe comes down to a combination of training and good management.

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What your children need to know

Children need to be taught how to approach and interact with dogs – both your own dog and other dogs they may meet. Never allow your child to approach a dog without the owner's permission.

Teach children to offer the back of their hand for the dog to sniff before making any contact. Then teach them to stroke the dog's shoulder gently with the **back** of their hand. This is less threatening for the dog and avoids the situation of the child grabbing and hurting the dog. Notice I say **stroke** the dog. Dogs dislike being patted – especially on the top of the head. Dogs also dislike being hugged.

Children like to run around when they play and they have high pitched voices. This movement and high pitched noise can trigger off a predatory response in some dogs (running and squealing is reminiscent of a prey animal). Other dogs from herding breeds (and many country dogs have working breeds in their makeup) have a natural inclination to round up children when they are running and playing as though they were wayward sheep.

You also need to teach your children how to behave in the presence of an unruly or threatening dog. Teach children to “be a tree” – stand absolutely still with hands either by their side or folded across their chest and turn their head away from the dog, avoiding eye contact until the dog moves away or adult help arrives. Then walk quietly and calmly away, avoiding eye contact, so that the dog isn't encouraged to chase. Although these measures won't absolutely guarantee your child won't get bitten, they will greatly reduce the chances of your child being harmed.

Finally, here are some useful resources. An absolutely wonderful resource for parents, with almost everything you would like to know about children and dogs is the book “Living with Kids and Dogs – without losing your mind” by Colleen Pelar (published by C&R Publishing). It is available in Australia for \$26.00 including postage from the Hungarian Vizsla Club of NSW, 35 Stanhope Street, Woonona. 2517 or via their website www.vizsla.org.au

And to read to your children is a great little educational book called “Can I Pat that Dog?” by Susan McLaine, Karen Damiani & Margaret Power (published by Angus & Robertson). This is an excellent book with beautiful illustrations and the text and drawings teach children when it is safe and when it is not safe to approach a dog. Cost is approximately \$24.00.

Finally, if you have any doubts about how to manage your children and dog, contact a professional trainer for help. The effort you put in to helping your children and dog develop a wonderful relationship will be something your children will value for the rest of their lives.

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