



Canines & Kids – Safe Behavior & Care Sheet

How Dogs Think Dogs are pack animals. They live in a group with a strict social structure. When a dog joins your household, he or she needs to learn his or her position within your family “pack.” Your dog is always testing to see if he or she can move up in rank. For safety and comfort, everyone in the family needs to be higher in the pack order than the dog. Pack leaders eat first and walk ahead of other pack members. A dog that knows the pack has a strong leader and is secure in his or her position in the pack feels secure, accepts the pack rules, and lives happily. Children often have a more difficult time establishing and holding their position in the pack. A dog is often eye level with a toddler and this can frighten the dog or the dog may view the child as a littermate equal in height and social position. The dog may feel he or she has the right to discipline the child by nipping or growling when the child tries to take the dog’s food or toy or plays too rough. Training both the dog and the child is essential for safety.

The Family Dog Establish the house rules and enforce them from the day your new dog arrives. Be sure the entire family uses the same rules. Eventually, even small children should be able to give obedience commands and have a dog obey. **A small child should never be left alone with any dog.** Let the child and pet get used to each other from across the room or yard. Keep distance between them until the dog is comfortable with being petted or hugged. Once the dog settles in, he or she may get tired of the child poking or pulling and might nip. This is natural canine behavior but unacceptable in a human family. As a rule of thumb, don’t allow children to do to a dog what you would not allow done to a toddler. Teach your children to respect the dog as a live animal that feels pain when hurt and has emotions and physical needs that must be met. At the same time, the dog must learn manners and not play too rough, put his or her mouth on an arm, jump up, or knock kids over. Avoid games of tug of war and keep-away. Good games for children and dogs are fetch, learning tricks like sit, stay and roll over, and practicing obedience.

A crate is your dog’s safe place. Put the dog in the crate to protect the dog from children who do not treat him or her gently or follow your rules or if the dog starts to get out of control with the children. The dog should be allowed time out to rest. Make sure the children understand the crate is the dog’s private area. **Never allow a child to crawl into the crate with the dog.** This could cause the dog to feel trapped and snap out of fear. Teach children to always speak to a sleeping dog before touching him or her.

Children can help feed and clean up after the dog, but don’t expect them to take sole responsibility for the dog’s care. Dogs are family pets and everyone should be involved in daily pet care.