

A Dog? For the Children?

Tips for bringing a dog into a household with kids

**By Kathy Lang, President & Training Director
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One of the most common reasons that dogs are given away or placed in shelters involves behavior problems related to children. If your childhood memories fondly include a family dog, or if your child starts begging for a puppy, put your emotions on hold and think through the decision that will change your life, your child's life and a dog's life forever.

The best age to bring a puppy home is when the youngest child is at least five years old. Toddlers and puppies are too much alike and both require a tremendous amount of time and attention. Wait until the child has the motor skills, patience and self-control to learn the proper ways to pet, handle and walk a puppy.

The worst time to bring a puppy into a household is during periods of change. Don't consider a puppy when your baby is just a few months old and crawling is just around the corner. Imagine life with a child going through the "terrible two's" and a puppy that needs to be housebroken and taught manners (such as not stealing the baby's toys, not jumping on the baby, not eating the baby's food).

Assuming the time is right and the entire family wants a dog (not just the kids, or one spouse), here are some things to consider:

Choose a breed that does well with children. Very small dogs, hyperactive breeds and particularly dominant dogs will not do well in a household with young children. Medium to larger breeds that are social and easy-going are better choices. Use the internet or your local library to research breeds that will best fit your lifestyle, even if you prefer a mixed breed or dog from the shelter. The more you know about various breed traits, the better equipped you'll be to make a smart decision.

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Choose a puppy or dog that was raised with children. Even if the breeder didn't have children herself, she should have socialized her puppies to friends' and neighbors' youngsters. If you're considering an older dog, make sure the animal has a good track record with children.

Give the dog a special place. Make sure the dog has a place to escape from active family life (such as a separate room or kennel or crate). Don't allow the children to bother the dog when Fluffy is in her special place. Over-stimulated and over-tired dogs are more likely to nip or growl.

Involve the children in training. As soon as the new puppy or dog comes home, begin a proactive and positive training program. Teach both dog and child the proper behavior before they stumble on to unacceptable behavior. Enroll in a puppy or obedience class that encourages family—and child—participation.

Supervise dog and child interactions. Hyperactive dogs and energetic children are not a good mix. Wear them out separately before bringing them together, otherwise the dog will be more likely to chase and knock down the child running through the yard with his stuffed teddy bear in tow. When the two are together, give them specific tasks, either together or separate. Help the child teach the dog simple tricks, such as fetching a ball or rolling over or sitting on command. Teach the dog to do a down stay while the child eats her afternoon snack. Be proactive, rather than reactive.

Deal with problem behaviors. Dogs are natural pack animals and they need an adult to be a firm, yet fair, pack leader. Children do not have the skills to act like pack leaders, so dogs see them as littermates. It will be up to the adults in the home to deal with leadership issues such as mouthing, stealing, nipping and knocking the child down. Enlist the help of a professional dog trainer or veterinarian to redirect the dog's behavior, teach him what's acceptable and what's not, and use corrections, discipline and/or time-outs as necessary to turn things around. Objectively look at your own children and see what role they might be playing in the dog's behavior problems.

When it all comes together, there's nothing more special than the love and bond that develops between a child and his dog. Just remember, it takes a lot of work to bring create those special childhood memories.

About the author: Kathy Lang has been training dogs and teaching people since 1977. She and her staff at Family Dog Training Center offer a wide range of training classes and private lessons at their facility in Kent. For more information, contact them at (253) 854-9663 or visit their website at www.familydogonline.com.

