



 By Mike Wombacher

Here's a sobering statistic: 80 percent of dog bites happen to children under five and 80 percent of those bites are directly in the face. Ouch! Considering that dogs have, as I like to say, worked their way from the backyard to the bedroom in the last 50 years, participating and playing an ever-greater role in every aspect of our lives, including those containing children, this is a situation in sore need of redress. That being the case, let's take a quick look at some helpful exercises you can do with your dog to safeguard his or her interactions with children.


First and foremost, ensure that your dog is well-trained and respects you as its leader. That doesn't mean you need to be a bully or that you need to "show him who's boss," but it does mean that your dog should be in the habit of looking to you for direction before making important decisions and in uncertain situations. This way you'll be able to guide your dog into new and novel circumstances, including those involving children.

Second, teach your dog to accept childlike handling and never—no matter what—to bite or even mouth gently in response to being touched. This can include holding the puppy in your arms without allowing him to struggle, giving him a body examination while doing so, "hazing" him by batting him around, pulling an ear, a tail, poking his side, all in an upbeat tone and with the presence of lavish treats. Any biting should be immediately and sharply reprimanded, as the dog must learn that humans may occasionally handle them a bit roughly, but that biting is still off limits. If you have an older dog that has never done such exercises, all the same rules basically apply, except that you want to take a bit more time to ease them into it. You can definitely teach an old dog new tricks; sometimes it just takes a little longer.

Also, have as many kids as you can ask your dog to do commands such as sit, down and whatever else you've taught them in exchange for treats, all the while keeping the whole experience positive. If your dog refuses a command, gently, but firmly, demand the behavior, teaching him that children carry at least some measure of your authority. Along the same lines, to the degree that your dog enjoys games such as fetch or favorite tricks, have children play games and practice tricks with your dog.

Teach your dog never to jump up on anyone, including children. There are a million ways to keep a dog from jumping: a spritz on the nose with a water bottle or a taste deterrent such as Binaca or even Bitter Apple spray; standing on the leash when the dog jumps up so that he gives himself a small correction; turning your back on the dog every time he jumps up and bending over to pet him only once he keeps all fours on the ground, etc.

I reiterate that to the degree that your dog respects you as leader—a position earned through consistent, kind training and the willingness to provide structure, guidance and authority—to that same degree will you be able to help your dog understand how to behave in novel and challenging situations.

Mike Wombacher is a 20-year veteran dog trainer and behavior modification expert. 

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