

# Puppies and Children

*By Brenda Howard*

There was a very disturbing story in the news this week about the mauling of an infant by a 6 month-old small terrier mix puppy. The mother of the young child was taking a nap with the child by her side when the incident happened. Horrifying. The infant will forever bear the scars of the mauling and the puppy was euthanized. The family will probably never ever trust another dog.

How did things go so wrong? Was the dog an evil bad tempered dog? Was the dog a bad choice of breeds – a bad fit with the family? No, the puppy was just that - a puppy and it did what any puppy would do – it was playing. I do not fault the family for the euthanasia – it would have been impossible to re-home the puppy and there could be no way they would be able to keep it after such a traumatic event.

Here is what I know. We grow up with images of young children being guarded and cared for by companion dogs, and Lassie saves Timmy on TV. And while there are indeed many great stories about dogs and kids there are far more statistics that point to the problems that can arise from our expectations of what the ideal should be.

The reality is that dogs and children should never be left unsupervised together. I am referring to young children – infants to 8 years of age (maybe even to 10 or 11 years of age depending on the maturity of the child).

Clearly even very small, very young puppies can cause harm to children. The opposite is also true. Children can cause harm to puppies.

Dogs do NOT speak our language as much as we would like to believe they do. Dogs have their own well documented language which is primarily made up of body movements. There are numerous books that detail what is known about canine body language. Dogs “read” people in the same way they read each other – by observing and displaying body language. Very young children move in herky-jerky motions that are impossible for most dogs to “interpret.”

Dogs jump, run, dig, climb, chew and yes, when they are puppies they bite. Dogs must be taught how to behave in our world. They need to be given boundaries. We must find a pleasant and effective way to communicate with our dogs so that we are safe and they are safe – obedience training.

Children do not know how to behave around dogs. Children make funny high pitched noises that dogs can't interpret. Children often do not understand how to approach a dog or how to pet one. They do not understand that pulling an ear can hurt, as can having toes pinched, or eyes poked. Children do not know their own strength.

It is naive to think that your children are going to be safe in the company of a dog. It is equally naive to believe that all children should have the “fun” of growing up with a dog. It is amazing to me that any new mother wants to take on the challenge of child rearing AND puppy rearing at the same time – this is a person who either has years of experience doing both or someone who hasn't a clue how much time and

effort are needed to do either job justice.

Prior to trusting older children to be unsupervised with dogs, demonstration of minimum skills should be required by children and dogs for the safety of both. First, you know your own child well enough to know whether or not he/she is mature enough to handle the responsibility of caring for the family dog. Your child should be able to handle anger and not be abusive when upset. Generally speaking children should be able to demonstrate a level of control when handling the dog, for instance walking with the dog on a loose lead (dog not pulling on the child and child not pulling on the dog). Your child should be able to set down the food bowl and pick it back up with the dog remaining in a sitting position. Your child should be able to tell the dog “off” for eliminating jumping and the dog complies. Your child should be able to command the attention of the dog using positive reinforcement. These are basic skills that all dogs should be taught and every member of the family should know how to perform.

Dogs and children each need their own beds! The child needs to learn to sleep with out parents in the bed and the dog needs to learn to sleep peacefully in his crate/bed.

Recently a young woman came to one of my training classes with her 4 month old black lab puppy. Over several weeks of classes I learned that she had a 3 year old son at home. The puppy was a birthday present for the 3-year old. WHAT!? Oh my. Clearly the child was not old enough to have any part in the care of the dog. The lessons of compassion for and responsibility to another species would have to wait for several years. I pointed out to the young woman that in fact, her son was far to young to make a decision about wanting a dog and that the dog had been purchased for her – not her son. This was not at all what she had believed – she truly thought she had gotten the dog for her son.

Thankfully she did learn a great deal through our class – how to house train, how to feed and care for the dog, how to protect her child from the dog, AND how to protect the dog from the child. Hopefully over the years the family will have many great “together” experiences.

Children and dogs make bring joy to our lives and make our families complete. We must always be well prepared for the challenges of learning how to do a good job of integrating our 2-legged loved ones with our 4-legged loved ones!

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