

Every year, thousands of children are bitten by the family dog. Here's some expert advice.

How To Make Sure That...

Good Dogs Don't Bite



By following a few simple steps, you can ensure that your buddy's bark remains worse than his bite.

SUMMERTIME IS PRIME injury time, and dog bites are no exception. Around 154,000 children under the age of 14 go to emergency rooms annually in the U.S. because of dog-related injuries. This number is less than accidents due to toys, playgrounds or sports, but any bite is one too many. Most bites happen at home with dogs known to the child. The most frequent biters? Unneutered male dogs. (Always neuter!) The most frequently bitten? Boys 5 to 9 years old.

Many of these bites are the result of human error and can be prevented. "Children need to be taught how to behave around dogs, and parents need to learn the warning signs that the dog

has had enough," says Dr. James Zgoda of Otterkill Animal Hospital in Campbell Hall, N.Y.

We agree. We tell our clients to keep things S.A.F.E.—Supervise, Anticipate, Follow through and Educate.

Supervise

Don't leave young kids and dogs out of sight together. Years back, a distraught client called to say his dog had snapped at his 4-year-old grandchild. He wanted to know if the dog should be put to sleep. It turns out the boy had been chasing the dog with a Wiffle ball bat. The dog didn't need to be euthanized—it needed protection!

By Sarah Wilson and Brian Kilcommons

If you can't supervise, then separate them by using a baby gate, crating your dog or keeping your dog on a leash. Julie Farris learned this lesson when a young girl visited her Florida home. "I stepped out of the room for a second, came back, and the girl was sticking her fingers in Seven's eyes," Farris recalls. Seven, a mixed breed, tolerated this treatment, but should we expect our pets to put up with such things?

"You are an advocate for your child—be one for your dog," counsels Becky Bishop, owner of Puppy Manners in Woodinville, Wash. Here's a rule to live by: Never allow a child to do to a dog what you would not allow done to a toddler—no ear pulling, jumping on, chasing after, screaming at, hitting, etc.

Anticipate

Avoid risky situations. If your dog is shy, put it in a quiet part of the house before your 8-year-old's birthday party starts. If your child is excited about a noisy new toy, you might want to crate your dog. If you have any feelings of concern/doubt/worry about a situation, act first so you don't have to react later.

Follow Through

Often we hear, "I can't stop my child from bothering the dog." To which we say, "Nonsense!" If your child was harassing an infant, you would stop it immediately.


Following through—with both species—is critical. "Stop it" means "stop it." Children and dogs both respond well to focusing on and rewarding good behavior.

Educate

Dogs know about being dogs; to understand our world, we need to teach them. Want your dog to be comfortable with kids near its food bowl? Walk up and drop a delicious treat in its bowl while the dog is eating, then walk away. (Do this when no child is around to imitate you.) If it wags its tail, great! If it freezes, growls or starts to aggressively gobble the

food, don't push it. Instead, contact a local trainer or behaviorist for advice.

Going to have a toddler in your life? Prepare your dog now. Again, when no children are around to watch, take some treats and practice handling your dog. Hold your dog's tail for a moment (be gentle). Give the dog a treat; praise as you release. Hold a paw or an ear the same way. Reward the dog each time. You are teaching it that such actions, though surprising, lead to good things.

Keeping our children and animals safe is our job, and we can do it by following a few simple S.A.F.E. steps. 

The authors are noted animal experts, trainers and lecturers.

 For more tips on how to prevent dog bites, visit www.parade.com on the Web.