



Introducing Kids and Dogs

You envision your new dog romping in the back yard with the kids, playing fetch with your son, sleeping at the foot of your daughter's bed. How can you successfully introduce a new dog into your household when you have children?

Just as children need to be taught how to be well-behaved around other people, they need to be taught to be well-behaved and respectful around animals. They need to learn what kinds of games are appropriate, how to touch the dog properly, how to interpret the dog's body language and when the dog is not to be disturbed. When they're old enough to understand, kids should also be involved in the dog training process.

Introductions – step by step

Careful handling of introductions will set the scene for future interactions and help your dog settle into family life.

Even if used to children in the past, a new dog will not be used to yours and will need time to get to know them. Start with the dog on a leash and be observant of how the dog is reacting. Help prevent the dog from feeling overwhelmed by insisting the dog approach the children rather than the other way round. Children should be standing still or sitting when the dog is first introduced. They can encourage the dog to come to them by sitting down and offering a treat. Have the child toss small treats on the ground as the dog approaches. Ask them not to stare as this can be threatening. Rather they should try and look at the dog's feet.

Tell the child to not look directly into the dog's eyes or reach toward, lean over, or hug the dog. Dogs do not always appreciate being hugged or cuddled by new or familiar people. It is a great temptation for children to do this, especially if they have been used to doing it to a previous dog.

When the dog looks comfortable picking up the treats from the ground at the child's feet, have the child hold her hand at her side with a treat in her fist (knuckles up). She should not move her hand toward the dog. When the dog sniffs her hand, she can slowly open her fist and allow the dog to take the treat from her open palm. Repeat this over and over.

If the dog is fearful, DO NOT tighten up on the leash or require him to sit-stay. This may increase his fear because he cannot back away. Do not force scary interactions on the dog. You will need to go more slowly with your introductions. Continue to have the child offer treats from a sitting position and contact the MSPCA for dog behavior assistance (www.mspca.org/dogtraining)

If the dog is showing aggressive behavior, separate the children and dog and contact the MSPCA for dog behavior assistance (www.mspca.org/dogtraining)



If the dog is not fearful, but is boisterous and jumping up instead, require him to sit for a treat. A Gentle Leader head halter can help with boisterous dogs. Do not use physical punishment at any time. If the dog is jumping, have the child walk away and only return when he is sitting calmly. If you haven't already done so, or if you need a refresher course, please contact the MSPCA for [Basic or Better Manners dog training classes](http://www.mspca.org/dogtraining) (www.mspca.org/dogtraining)

When the dog is comfortable taking the treat from the child, she can gently scratch him under the chin as he does so. Never reach over his head. The child can then ask the dog to "sit" for a treat reward. Gradually introduce more interaction, like petting and stroking, if dog is doing well.

Be a good parent to your children and your dog

Do not leave the dog and child unsupervised! Children should never, ever be left alone with any dog, no matter how reliable the dog has been before. A responsible adult needs to be on the scene **watching** the interactions between them to prevent any aggressive behavior by the dog and to keep the child from putting him or herself in danger. Telling the toddler to stay away from the dog isn't enough. Remember that young children don't recognize when they may be in trouble. It's up to the adult to keep them safe from the dog and to keep the dog safe from the children. If you can't be right there to handle whatever might come up, the dog should be put away out of reach of the kids. Crates and baby gates are excellent for children and for dogs when cannot supervise them appropriately.

Teach your child appropriate behavior around dogs. You need to teach your children that they cannot be impolite to the dog. They may not sit on the dog, pull on his ears, or bother him when he's eating or in his crate. You will need to teach your children to "Leave the dog alone" at times. You need to be the one who is always paying attention and be ready to step in and separate if necessary. Be sure to remove your child, gently but firmly, from the dog long before the dog has become irritated to the point of growling. If you are always there to manage your child's behavior around the dog, and vice versa, you will help build positive interactions and prevent negative ones.

Some dogs, such as Collies and German Shepherds, have a strong herding instinct and may nip at children's ankles, causing them to squeal and run away. This excites the dog, encouraging more of the same, so this type of behavior must be stopped at once or it can become a habit. Kids should stand perfectly still when the dog attempts to "herd" them and the dog will usually stop immediately.

Never tie a dog out in the yard. Children tend to tease tethered dogs without even realizing it, which can lead to aggressive behavior.

Be especially careful with older dogs and children. A dog with impaired vision or hearing can be startled by sudden approaches. An older dog who is in pain due to arthritis may not want to be



touched on a particular part of the body. Explain the difficulties the dog is having to the children so they learn to approach more gently.

Successful relationships between kids and dogs require a large investment of time by the parent, but the rewards are great. Remember it's important to start off right with controlled and safe introductions. For the safety of both dog and child, appropriate supervision is always imperative. If you have further questions, please don't hesitate to contact the MSPCA.