

# Kiddos and Canines: Setting up for success

Navigating life with dogs and children can be a lot, especially when introducing new dogs into a family. Not all dogs have the same experiences or tolerance levels around our kids, and it's our job to set up the situation thoughtfully so that all parties can be successful and safe. Children make up over 50% of dog bites, but there are many ways that we can work to make sure our dogs and kids feel comfortable around each other! *For additional resources, specially educated trainers, and specific training recommendations, visit [www.familypaws.com](http://www.familypaws.com)*

## What Does Supervision Mean?

If you have dogs and children, chances are you are busy! We can't be everywhere at once, so you must plan to have different strategies for different scenarios. Not all supervision is created equal; we need to make sure to think ahead in our routine to set up our dogs and kids for safety.



## Use Your Environment

It is vitally important to use our space and routine to make it easy for our dogs and our kids to succeed. It's our job as guardians to be PROACTIVE, not reactive. When we cannot achieve active supervision, we need to use the environment to our advantage. Some examples include:

- **Barriers/baby gates/crates.** These tools prevent your child and your dog from accessing each other easily when you are not able to offer proactive or active supervision.
- **Levels and height (chair, child on body, crib).** Depending on the size of your dog and the developmental stage of your child, changing up who is on a couch, in a highchair, at a table or counter, in a sling or backpack, or on a bed can make a big difference in creating an extra barrier during interaction.
- **Closed doors and air locks.** A closed door or a door/area/door combo (airlock) are the fastest and most secure options when you do not have time for proactive or active supervision.
- **Enrichment projects for our dogs.** To combat FOMO in our dogs, it's important to give them things that they can do when you have to separate them from your or your child's area. See our [\*Canine Enrichment Handout\*](#) for lots of ideas!
- **Enrichment projects for our kids.** If the dog is having exciting playtime, that can be a big draw. Offering an activity to keep your child's interest is also helpful when we need to relate to our dogs, such as when putting on equipment, bathing, training, or exercise in the yard. You can even have older kids assist in creating enrichment items for your dog!
- **Yard time for dogs.** If you have access to an enclosed yard or outdoor area, this can be a good option for when you need separation without your dog feeling left out of the fun.
- **Rotation routines.** We highly recommend looking at your current routine and making STRUCTURAL changes that incorporate the tips above.
  - For example, if everyone in the household knows that the dog goes out back with a long chew item or frozen Kong during dinner prep, you automatically avoid situations like guarding dropped food or unwanted interactions during a time when you know you won't be able to offer active supervision.

## Toys

Whether dog toys or kid toys, we need to make sure we are planning for when and where our dogs and kids have access to their toys, and where they are in relation to one another. If a child's toy area is accessible to a dog, it's reasonable to expect that the dog would investigate, chew, or even guard one of the child's toys.

- Keep dog and child toy areas separate if possible
- Plan for bins or other places where children's toys can be easily stowed
- Use barriers strategically during playtime
- Talk to your child about how to interact with dogs and toys, if age appropriate

## Bowls, Beds, and Bones

Resource guarding is one of the most common reasons that dog bites to children occur. Dogs are naturally inclined to protect resources, and though some express this natural behavior more than others, *we must always prepare as if resource guarding is a possibility*. Here are some tips on what resource guarding prevention can look like:

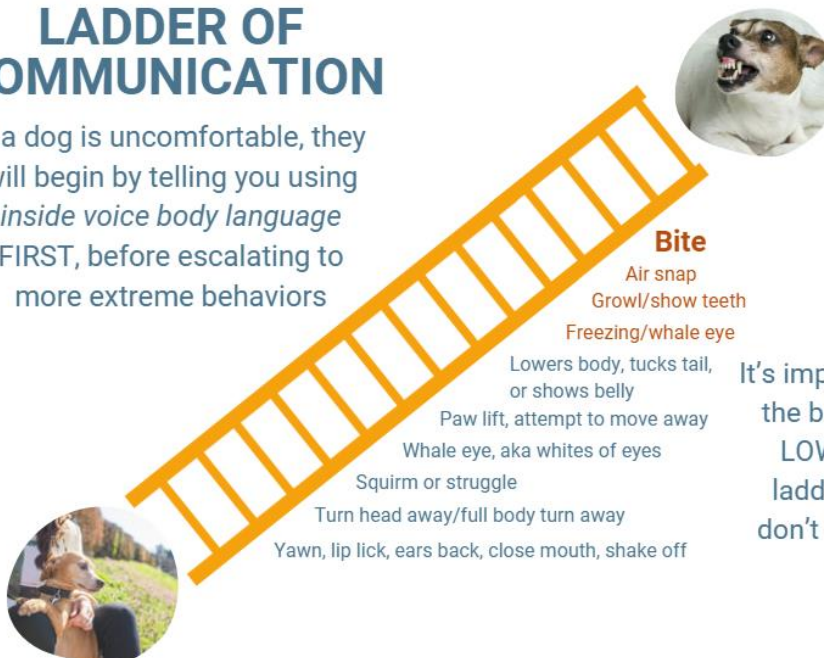
- **Rotation around meals.** Rotating dogs out of a child's space using a barrier like a door, gate, or crate while the child is eating (and vice versa!) is the easiest way to prevent food guarding.
- **Restriction of dog resting area.** Some dogs guard their beds, and many can startle and bite if disturbed while sleeping. Thoughtful placement of a dog's favored sleeping area can make a big difference, especially when combined with educating children not to disturb the dog while sleeping or at rest.
- **Thoughtful setup for enrichment and toys.** If a dog has a chew, bone, or other enrichment item, a quick barrier or alternative activity for the child can keep everyone safe. If involving an older child in enrichment, you can have them do things like toss items or treats from a bed or stairs, or from behind a gate.
- **Trading for toys.** When our kids are old enough to participate in play, "trade outs" are the best way to go! If a dog is playing fetch or tug, we want to have TWO of the toy the dog is using. One to be thrown or tugged, and one to be picked up as an alternative when we need the dog to switch. This avoids a child (or adult!) reaching into a dog's mouth to get them to drop something, and usually avoids frustrating "keep away" scenarios.
- **Creative alternatives.** If age appropriate, kids often want to be involved in feeding or play! But how we help them interact can prevent tense situations. Examples of space-making strategies might include a child tossing meal kibble for a dog to catch or chase rather than putting a bowl down, or a child wielding a "flirt pole" (with assistance) to initiate play.

## Dog Body Language

There are so many ways that our dogs will communicate they are uncomfortable BEFORE a snap or bite. And even those who have had dogs their whole lives often do not see the most subtle of these signals! *It's important that we and our children learn to read and respect our dog's signals.* The vast majority of dogs will show MANY low-level signals of fear or discomfort before escalating to a bite. Below is an example of how most dogs will communicate that discomfort:

### LADDER OF COMMUNICATION

If a dog is uncomfortable, they will begin by telling you using *inside voice body language* FIRST, before escalating to more extreme behaviors



It's important to respect the behaviors on the LOW rungs of the ladder so our dogs don't feel the need to escalate!

If we give our dogs space when we see the “low rung” behaviors, they will not need to escalate to a bite to get their point across. For an in-depth overview of dog body language, check out our [\*Decoding Doggie Dialogues: Canine Communication 101\*](#) webinar!

## Teach Kids What TO Do

Once our children are old enough to begin learning how to interact with our dogs, it's our job to give them the tools for both observation and interaction. Here are some examples of how we can frame these topics for our children:

- **Pat, Pet, Pause!** This is essentially a “[\*consent check\*](#).” When wanting to interact with an animal, we pat our leg or our body to invite the animal to us. If they come and engage, we pet them briefly, then pause, and observe what they do. If they reengage, we continue petting! But if they DON'T, we respect their choice and try something else, like a toy or giving them space.
- **“Be a tree!” game.** Sometimes running feet can be exciting or worrying for our dogs. If we coach our kids to “be a tree!” which means your feet are rooted to the ground, and your hands are out and down like branches. This is an easy way to ask our child to bring their energy down for a moment if needed.
- **Practice “out of context.”** Build up some muscle memory with skills like “be a tree” when the dog is not present! We have a saying in behavior, “Don't practice at the recital.” We want skills on board *before* an exciting or scary situation where they become non-negotiable.
- **Talk through body language in real time.** Kids need to see observation skills modeled, and in ways that make sense to them. Examples might be:
  - *“I see Fido's ears are back and his tail is low – let's step back and give him some space, his body is telling us he's a little worried”*
  - *“Oh wow, Fido is really wiggly, his body is showing us how excited he is! Dogs that are excited might play with their paws or their mouths, let's give him a toy to play with so he doesn't try to play with our bodies!”*
- **Model actions, observations, decisions, and empathy.** The biggest way kids learn from us comes from the behaviors we model – if we are punishing our animals in front of them, whether raising our voices or using threatening body language – our children may mimic these behaviors, which could be extremely unsafe. The things we tell our children don't matter if what they are seeing doesn't match what our words are saying – we need to lead by example and model empathy, compassion, consent, and good management decisions.

## Teach Dogs What TO Do

So often we are approaching through the lens of “don't.” But that is not only unclear for our dogs, it doesn't build any actual skills! Instead, we want to build a repertoire of skills that we can use for many situations. Here are a few to get started with that can make a big difference in a dog/child household (with links to tutorials in our free library online):

- [\*Nose target\*](#) (easy way to call dog to you, alternative greeting to jumping, move through space)
- [\*LAT, aka, Look At That\*](#) (exercise to counter-condition to worrisome or overexciting triggers)
- [\*Relaxation on a mat\*](#) (Default behavior which conditions a dog to relax their body)
- [\*Go to place\*](#) (during exciting moments, when rotating through routine, make space temporarily)
- [\*Stay on place\*](#) (Part 2 to Go to Place)

## Punishment: What to Do Instead

An important part of thoughtfully guiding dog/child interactions is taking punishment out of your vocabulary. For our dogs punishment can reduce our warning signs and increase fear/conflict, and for our kids it can create stress and shut down learning opportunities.

Instead, we want to lean into proactive management, and make time to teach our kids and dogs the skills they will need if things go wrong BEFORE they're necessary. For both kids and dogs, practicing "out of context" can make all the difference in the world.

Remember, "don't practice at the recital." Our bodies need muscle memory to perform under stress or excitement! If the only time we practice a skill is in a tense moment when it's absolutely necessary, it will not be as effective as if we've *spent time learning the skill when the only stakes were that we had fun doing it.*

### Here's an example of using thoughtful setup, skill building, and communication to avoid a potentially risky interaction.

Scenario: A child is eating a snack at a coffee table, and a dog is nearby. The child drops a piece of bread, and the dog immediately gets up and moves towards the child. The child begins to reach down for their dropped bread just as the dog approaches. An opportunity for resource guarding has been created.

- **Approach 1:** We run towards the dog shouting "Fido, NO! LEAVE IT!" grab the startled dog, and move them away from the food. We tell our child they need to be careful when eating and not drop food where the dog can get it.

In this approach, both dog and child might be startled/worried about the outburst. The child might associate the dog with something to be scared of/something that can get them in trouble, and the dog might associate being near the child with being punished. *While this approach is intuitive, and not inherently harmful, with a few adjustments we can create a better learning environment!*

- **Approach 2:** We call out to our child: "Uh oh, oops! Charlie--be a tree!!" The child freezes in an upright posture, not reaching for the food. If we have a solid nose target with our dog, we can ask for "Fido, touch!" and move the dog away. If we don't and the dog eats the bread, we can simply approach them both, and call the dog away, perhaps behind a barrier to prevent future approaches while the child is eating. To the child, we can say, "Great job being a tree! Just like we practiced. We definitely want to be careful with our food, we don't want Fido to get upset if he thinks you're going to try and take something he thinks is his because it's on the ground."

In this approach, we get what we need (safety) without using fear, the child understands what happened, we use skills that both the child and the dog have learned, and we have a teachable moment which is more likely to foster behaviors we want in the future!

For additional resources on how to interact with kids using reinforcement-based strategies, we recommend checking out [resources from educator Chazz Lewis](#).

If you would like to schedule a free 15min phone call with one of our trainers to discuss how to set your dog up for success around kids, you can sign up for a helpline at [www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp](http://www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp)