

Children & Dogs

Friends for life or tragic clashes?

by Rita Martinez

The term “Lassie Syndrome” comes up frequently among trainers. For whatever reasons, we humans seem to feel that children and dogs belong together playing happily and it’s a given that it will work out that way *on its own*. Unfortunately, we live in the real world rather than the movies, and too often things do not go as expected.

Children and dogs are more than two different species – they come from completely different places in nature. Each is bound to operate within the parameters of their own understanding – what else can they do? Things can go terribly wrong when proper supervision and preparations are not a priority. When things go wrong – the dog always loses ☹

Let’s take a quick look at the different perceptions of dogs and children. Dogs communicate with a sophisticated system of body language since they don’t have verbal language. This system of body language works beautifully with all but the human species. Dogs and all other mammals have various space issues. These vary from individual to individual. Children, especially toddlers, do not respect space boundaries with any species. Children are not proficient at body language and toddler motor skills are often undeveloped as to make for smooth definitive motion. Children are not always viewed as the same species as adult humans by a canine. Children move in jerky, erratic ways and often squeal and fall and run, poke and pull at dogs. This can put them in the ‘prey’ category ☹

So, how can we as owners and/or parents keep things from going wrong? Supervision, management, training, regulation, dedication as well as a lot of understanding of both perspectives. Supervision is a 100% necessary element. It is impossible to prevent an event if you are not present prior to it. Adults are the sole provider for keeping both dogs and children safe. This is a full time commitment and although it is not always convenient, it is always required. Children and dogs need an ‘on duty’ lifeguard capable of managing every situation to avoid a clash. Obedience training is also critical. People usually consider this to be for the dogs, and it is. But, *it is also* for the children. It is imperative that children be required to treat dogs with respect, grant them solitude when they ask, and understand space criterion. Children must learn to respect a dog as an individual with feelings and emotions, just as they themselves possess these things. This *isn’t* something that can be ‘explained’ to a toddler – it must simply be managed, just like fingers in electrical outlets are managed and not explained.

Management is a big word and can involve many aids to attain 100% supervision. There are baby/dog gates, crates, kennels, leashes, separate rooms, outside, and all sorts of paraphernalia and alternatives to help with those times that a parent is busy and cannot oversee the interaction adequately. In training circles we use this word frequently, as any time one is living or working with animals, there is an element of management that is necessary. Fact is, when we live with dogs we are actually co-habiting with a species that can kill us. Don’t be alarmed – more husbands and wives kill one another than dogs kill owners! But, keep in mind that when given no choice or respect, a dog will feel forced to use his or her teeth. They simply can’t run to you and complain, “Jonny is pulling my ear and won’t leave me alone”! ☹ If the adult is not in charge, the dogs must handle the problem themselves.

Our present society simply does not have realistic expectations of dogs. We expect them to tolerate pesky treatment cheerfully, always turning the other cheek. Would we feel that way about a Wolf, or a raccoon (as my daughter had to grow up with as a house pet)?

Serious clashes rarely happen without warnings. These warnings may be subtle at first and escalate if no notice is taken. Reactions do not come “out of the blue”. There are always signals. Learn to pay attention and recognize the signs. If a dog wants to get away from a child, realize that they are not having fun and asking to be chased – INTERVENE! If a dog growls, take notice, as this is a verbal warning. If a dog tries to hide behind you to avoid a child, give the dog a safe spot. In short, *pay attention* to how the dog is reacting. If you see things that concern you and you are unsure of how to remedy them, seek professional help from a behaviorist immediately. Don't wait until things are out of hand to call someone in. Sooner is better than later. If you have a dog with resource guarding issues, seek professional assistance in getting those under control immediately.

Not everyone that lives with a dog gets this dog after children come into the family. Many dogs are our ‘first’ babies and are treated that way as full family members. Adding a new sibling is a big adjustment. However, most people are aware that there is going to be a human addition to the family for at least 7 months. That leaves a good deal of time to work on preparations to help avoid clashes. Many simple things can be done, as well as proper manners, through obedience work. A nursery can be desensitized for months prior to bringing home the baby. The nursery can be an off limits room (baby gate again) unless invited in. There are wonderful tapes available of crying babies to give the dog a dose of what's to come. Sprinkling baby powder about the nursery area, borrowing baby blankets from a friend with a baby, and exposure at a distance of babies and children are just a few ways to desensitize the dog ahead of time.

When the baby comes home it is natural for everyone to feel the change. There may be some jealousy – routines are altered and life is not as predictable as before. Allow the dog to be included in nice quiet time. The dog should receive its *best* personal interaction time with the baby present. Never let the dog feel that it receives greater attention if the baby *isn't* there. Let them need one another to enjoy the best of times. Don't push the dog away if they want a sniff, simply limit how long or how pushy the sniff is. This goes back to obedience and reliable behaviors. An ‘enough’ command would let the dog experience the scent and then you can ask for the stop.

Growling is a good thing. At least they are offering a warning first. Don't punish a dog for giving a warning. Intervene and *prevent the situation from recurring again*. Dogs trained with positive reinforcement rather than harsh corrections are typically more tolerant of children. A book could be written on the opinions of why, but it's easiest to simply not use harsh methods to train a dog that will be around children – they may learn to be reactive instead of responsive.

Toddlers and older children love to hug dogs. This can be a problem. Not all dogs accept hugs enthusiastically. Actually, going over a dogs upper shoulder area can be perceived as a final threat, as you may have observed between dogs prior to a fight. In fact, not all humans like to be hugged either. It's a space and comfort thing and best discouraged with dogs and children. Children, and adults, seem to think patting a dog on the top of the head shows affection. When testing shelter dogs for temperament, we do this because it is such a common human practice. Fact is, dogs hate being bonked on the head and this action should be discouraged in children as well. A smooth sliding pet is always better than pats, as they become hits with small motor skill deficiencies in

children and can head things in the wrong direction. Children like to run up to dogs. Approaches should be calm and not head on, but in a curve and the child should stop a couple feet from the dog. If the dog wishes to have interaction, let the dog approach the child. Try and imagine yourself at a dog's level with this arm flailing, jerky moving, and squealing creature running for them. Would you be worried?

What happens when things escalate into an event? This is the horrible call we all get far too often. The dog bite dilemma ☹️ No two cases are identical, but often much of the obedience, supervision, recognizing warning signs and calling for help have simply not occurred. Now the dog faces, at best, a re-homing, but all too often death, as re-homing a dog that has bitten is very difficult.

At any rate, there needs to be three things happen:

- Keep the dog and children separated until the other two have been completed.
- A complete medical exam to determine a health problem or pain from an injury or condition. This should include a complete physical and blood work to get a real picture.
- An evaluation and temperament test by a qualified behaviorist to determine the source and degree of the problem and the chances of rehabilitation.

All owners owe the dog this much! We take them on as family members and they are our responsibility – to protect, enjoy and treat fairly in a time of trouble.

Bites are a serious problem, but not one that happens abruptly without an underlying cause. Remember, a dog that has been fine and *suddenly* becomes reactive may very well not be feeling well. Children are the most frequent bite victims because they are just that – children. They are not operating with knowledge and adult reasoning – the adults are responsible to make sure *both* species are safe and learn to understand one another's needs and respect their differences.

An aside, I've always had dogs in the home (among other wild animal species) and have raised the kids with them. My daughter claims to have been obedience trained from the beginning (and she's now a normal adult ☺️). Kids at my house knew that if they were bitten, they had one LOT of explaining to do, and my daughter jokingly says I'd probably have threatened her with re-homing ☺️. Of course I wouldn't have, but it makes for a good laugh.

All in all – children and dogs together can be a beautiful thing, but not without work and commitment from the adults. It takes vigilance and often professional help to accomplish the 'Lassie syndrome household'...

-Rita Martinez, CPDT
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