

Kidding Around



Just like in the movies.

Like Travis and Old Yeller, Lassie and Timmy, Rusty and Rin Tin Tin, and even Lassie and Elizabeth Taylor as 11-year old Priscilla in "Lassie Come Home," dogs and kids have been paired in books and films for as long as we can remember. In real life they fit together like apple pie and ice cream. Right? Not so fast!

Those of you who look through the pet classifieds in the paper or on the Internet on pet sites like Petfinder.com will note that many dogs often have a disclaimer about not being particularly "kid friendly." In her book, *The Culture Clash*, Jean Donaldson tells the story of a family with three older children, ages 11, 15 and 17. When one of their two German shepherds died they got a new puppy and at age eight months they were shocked and appalled when the puppy bit a six-year old visitor. The real truth is that the dog bite in this particular case was not completely unexpected.

While many people now know that dogs are not capable of generalized learning. In other words, they do not understand how to apply that knowledge to include a broad enough range of social experiences. A teenager is much different for a dog than an infant or a toddler and certainly far different than a six-year old. If you are lucky enough to adopt a puppy, make sure you expose that puppy to every child possible; every temperament, size, shape and color and maybe then you can breathe more easily.

What about rescued or older dogs?

What if you inherit a rescue dog with an impoverished history of socializing—or whose social experiences are simply unknown to you? Let's say you have an adult dog you thought you could trust but has displayed some signs of discomfort with children; panting more around children, eliciting low growls, snarling or even baring its teeth. It's time to step back and do some remedial socializing.

The holidays are coming up fast and with them increased social time and holiday parties. Be a smart, pro-active dog owner and follow some very simple steps to help keep everyone safe and happy for the holidays and beyond.

Teach children to respect canine etiquette.

Children must be carefully instructed on the proper etiquette and body language to use when meeting any new dog. The first and most important thing to tell children is that they must never pet a dog without asking permission of the dog's owner. Once permission is given and not before, they may stand sideways and offer the dog their open hand to sniff, if possible, without actually looking at the dog. Dogs interpret direct eye contact with strangers as very rude.

The best thing to do next is to let the child offer the dog a treat in their open hand. If one is not available, the child may gently scratch the dog under its chin. The thing to avoid doing is patting the dog on its head, a gesture as natural to us as shaking someone's hand when you first meet. According to Patricia McConnell in her very helpful book *The Other End of the Leash*, you might as well "urinate on a dog's head" when greeting him with such direct approaches like a pat on the top of the head. Obviously, once a dog is known to you, you may take certain liberties like a friendly pat on the head.

The one other important piece of information regarding body language for everyone to know, especially children, is that you should avoid bending over a dog when first greeting it. Maintain an upright posture and if the dog is smaller you may kneel straight down, but avoid bending toward the dog. When instructing children, I find it works best to demonstrate exactly what you'd like them to do first, and then stand by to provide coaching to them. Kids love to learn about dogs and appreciate positive reinforcement when they do well. Sometimes that will even come in the form of a lick on the face by a friendly, well-socialized dog.

Just know dogs are keenly aware of our gestures and body language and will often see us in ways we can't begin to imagine. As an extreme example, my sister who is a great dog lover, made the tragic mistake of simply looking at a dog seated outside a Starbucks with its owners while she walked in. In a split second, the dog attacked her and took a sizable bite out of her thigh. After a protracted legal battle and a painful physical recovery, she now knows never to look at a dog she doesn't know without being "properly introduced." While this might be considered an unusual case, and clearly this was a troubled dog, it does put the casual practice of looking directly at a dog into question.

It is keenly important to be aware of how children move around strange or novel dogs. A dog that is not used to children will find it extremely upsetting to have a group of wild and active kids playing in close proximity. In this case, it's best to put the dog in a separate quiet space away from the commotion and to meet each child individually and in a controlled fashion.

How to "make friends" with kids.

The best way to make sure your dog is safe with any new child is to do some basic desensitizing. When you go out in public always have a high-value treat ready. A high-value is something the dog likes very much, a favorite treat, a piece of cheese or meat—something that will make an impression.

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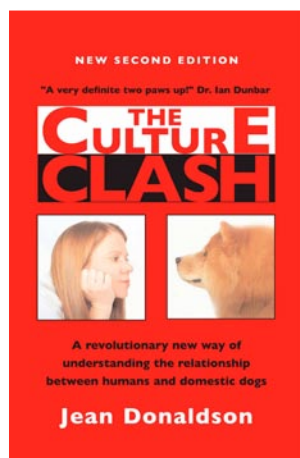
As soon as the dog observes a new child, either on the street or anywhere nearby, praise the dog while you quickly pop a treat into his or her mouth. Do that as often as possible until the dog looks at a child and automatically looks at you for his treat. Basically, what you are telling the dog is that a child is a good thing—he or she is a predictor of a tasty treat.

If you are having a holiday party and expecting new kids, take the time to introduce your dog to any newcomer using the steps explained below:

1. Have the child stand sideways and offer an outstretched open facing hand.
2. Allow the dog to sniff the hand first and then place a high-value treat in it.
3. Allow the dog to safely take the treat from the child.
4. Do this several times.
5. Have the child change her stance to face the dog and repeat steps 1 – 3.
6. Have the child kneel straight down and repeat steps 1 – 3.
7. Praise the dog each time in a "happy high-pitched" voice.
8. Repeat this process for each new child, without exception.

Now that you've done everything possible to make sure your furry friend has been properly introduced to small humans, you can take a deep breath. Bring on the dog movies, the apple pie and the ice cream and have a happy, safe and fun-filled holiday season! 🐾

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The Culture Clash

A Revolutionary New Way to Understanding the Relationship Between Humans and Domestic Dogs. *James & Kenneth*; \$17.95
BY JEAN DONALDSON

MORE BOOKS WE LOVE *The Culture Clash* depicts dogs as they really are—stripped of their Hollywood fluff, with their loveable "can I eat it, chew it, pee on it, what's in it for me" philosophy. Ms. Donaldson's tremendous affection for dogs shines through at all times, as does her keen insight into the dog's mind. Relentlessly she champions the dog's point of view, always showing concern for their education and well being.

GRADE: 🐾🐾🐾🐾

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