

CHILDREN AND DOGS

By Dany Canino

This month's guest columnist is Dany Canino. Ms. Canino is a professional all breed handler, a member of the Professional Handlers' Association, and all breed obedience trainer and a former AKC Licensed Judge. Dany's column is directed at parents and children, but many of the situations mentioned apply equally to every dog owner. We often forget that animals have rights too, but are unable to "voice" their opinions.

As a professional dog trainer, I am constantly faced with the situation of a parent calling me and saying, "...our dog just bit our child."

Nine times out of ten when I pursue the situation, I find that the child has teased or (unknowingly) agitated the dog. Ten times out of ten I find that there has been no form of obedience training with the dog and no joint discipline for dog and child combined.

Owning a dog is a big responsibility. Owning a dog with children around is an even greater responsibility. All of God's creatures have certain rights to which they are entitled. They have a right to be treated with as much respect (and be allowed as much privacy) and dignity as we, as humans, expect.

Let me stage a couple of situations for you, using *you* as an example.

1 You've just sat down to eat your first (and only) meal of the day. Just as you've taken your second or third bite of sheer enjoyment, someone starts patting you on the back. They lift up your hand from the table where it's been resting and then the ultimate agitation --- they take your plate away from you.

Your response: You would most probably shout a few expletives, and if this has happened to you in the past, you might even take a swing at the offender.

Your dog's response in the same

situation: A growl (verbal expletive) and perhaps an attempted bite (human swing).

2 You've been running here and there all day long and you've finally found a moment to lie down for rest. As you fall into a deep sleep, you're suddenly awakened by someone jostling you. They (for some unknown reason) think that now would be a fun time to tease you.

Your response: Probably no more verbal threats; you go right for the jugular.

Your dog's response in the same situation: Same as that of the human.

These disturbances which I have just staged are usually perpetrated on the dog by small children-- children who have not been given proper guidance by a parent or an adult on how to act around an animal. Every parent feels that it would be nice for their children to grow up with a dog. This is a fine idea--or it can be as long as the parent takes the time to teach the child how to behave around the dog.

You should start from Day One telling the child when it is all right for him to play with the dog. *Not when the animal is trying to eat or sleep!* Don't be afraid to relate the dog's rights to the child's rights. Show the child how to properly show affection for the dog. Dogs prefer stroking to patting. Some breeds don't object to being hugged now and

then, as long as the hugger lets the dog come up for air sooner or later. Dogs don't like the feeling of being smothered any more than your child likes being held snugly to the bosom of some relative that can't seem to let the child loose.

Dogs instinctively respond to what we call the "hand/eye action." Fast moving hands around the dog's face in an almost slapping action teaches the dog to snap out at the hands; ergo, teaching the dog to bite. Then, when the dog reacts as his instincts tell him to, he's deemed vicious or a child hater. *Do you blame him for either?*

Just as children need to be taught how to be well behaved in society around other humans, they must also be taught how to be well behaved around animals. A hyperactive child around a dog will cause the dog to become hyper or sometimes it will cause a dog that might otherwise be quite calm in nature to become shy, introverted, or even a fear biter.

Formal obedience training for a dog can be a solution. Whether the dog has the potential to go all the way to Best In Show or not; obedience training will only help to enhance his performance in the ring and out of the ring. When you are training your dog (either in a class or at home) encourage your children to watch. If they are old enough (eleven years or older), let them become involved with this responsibility. If your trainer feels that having the children around will present too

great a distraction, go to another trainer. Dogs need to work around distractions so they will be well behaved no matter what is going on around them.

I am a firm believer that some adults (and some children) should not own a dog. If your social or work calendar does not permit you enough time to train the dog, *then don't own a dog!* If you can't (or won't) take the time to observe your child's actions around the dog and are not willing to reprimand the child for being abusive towards the dog, or if you don't have the time (or patience) to teach the child proper child/animal relationship--then *don't own a dog!* Buy your child some goldfish instead. They demand very little time and can swim away from any unwanted abuse.

There's no greater picture than a child and a dog together--in play, at rest, or simply inhabiting the same household. But just as we owe a responsibility to that child to make it both physically and emotionally healthy, we owe the same responsibility to the dog. Children and dogs are a wonderful combination--as long as both are taught respect for each other.

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