

Dog Trainer's Diary

By Carol Benjamin

KIDS AND DOGS SAFETY FIRST

Dogs and kids seem a natural combination. Yet both have to learn how to behave appropriately around each other. In some circumstances, you must protect your children from your dogs. In others, you must protect your dog from your children. After some patience and a little work, the lives of both can be enriched by the bond they share with each other. Sometimes, the natural behavior of a dog is at odds with the way you want your child treated. To a dog's mind, if it's on the floor, it's his. If it happens to be the pickle that slithered off your plate to the kitchen floor, it will more than likely be resting comfortably in your dog's stomach before you can retrieve it. If it is your crawling baby, your dog, untrained, may treat baby like another dog. This can mean mouthing, nipping and tugging on clothes. A few well placed NO's should teach any nice dog his limits. When Baby gets older and a little tougher, he's apt to be a menace to your dog. At two, he'll pull fur, tug at ears, poke little fingers in eyes, slam his toy truck onto your sleeping pet. Young children need supervision when playing with dogs. A small child can't be expected to control the behavior of a dog, large or small. Nor can he always control his own impulses or understand that the big, hairy "toy" has feelings, too.

When children get a little older, they tend to smother dogs with affection. This is particularly true when there are several children in the family. Unless you have a dog for each, when one plays with Fido, he'll become the main attraction. And a dog getting piled on by three kids at a time is apt to panic. He may, despite his good breeding, try to defend himself. Some simple ground rules help. A dog should never be cornered, or followed into his under-the-table retreat, or end up

on the bottom of a heap of giggling siblings.

Kid's Games

Puppies love to steal children's toys. In this case, you'll have to step in and monitor the puppy's behavior. Like kids, a puppy will focus on objects that feel good, taste good, smell good and get lots of attention — like a favorite Teddy. When the kids run after him, he thinks it's a game. Teddy in mouth, he'll dash around the dining room table. The more the kids yell and run, the more fun the game of Can You Catch Me? If your puppy is obedient, don't chase him but call him. Grasp the toy, telling him OUT, take it and praise him, even if he put up a small fight. He'll catch on. If he's not obedient (too young, not yet trained, just plain full of the devil), tie a long string to his collar at playtime. Then when he gets a mouth full of toys and takes off to tease the kids, call him to come. If he's on the far side of the table, ready to dash away and keep his treasure as long as possible, pick up the end of the string and give a tug. He'll catch on.

It's awfully hard on dogs to watch children tearing back and forth, as children are apt to do, and not get in on the fun. Some will let their herding instincts take over. They'll nip at little feet and pull at clothing as the kids go whizzing by. When puppy gets wild, teach the kids to freeze. This alone may stop the herding and nipping. Let them run again, with you watching. This time, if puppy herds and nips, reprimand him with a sharp NO and a shake by his collar. If he still continues, separate him from the kids for a while by crating him or confining him to another room. In this way, you'll be teaching him his limits and some important manners. And the kids will learn how to

minimize his mini attacks as best they can.

Morning Rights

Just as Fido must learn to respect the rights of your children and their property, so must *they* learn to respect *his* rights and *his* things. First, they should let sleeping dogs lie. Some dogs, like some people, are pretty grouchy until their first cup of coffee. Being startled back into a wakeful state may get more than their dander up — it may raise their hackles, too. If the kids want to play and the dog is having a cat nap, they are better off calling him than pouncing on him. And this kind of respect can't hurt your own lazy Sunday mornings either.

Mealtime Manners

While it's best not to fuss with a dog who's in the middle of dinner, you should have your dog trained to accept this kind of interference — just for emergencies. When he's little, tell him OK when he gets his food. Then, with his leash on, tell him NO one day when you put down his bowl. If he waits, give him a fast OK and praise him. If he lunges for his chow, jerk him back with his leash and repeat NO. If he now waits, tell him OK and praise him. Once this routine is established and he will wait for his release word, try taking the food away in the middle of a meal. If he growls or complains, scold him and don't give him back his dinner. If he's reasonable about the whole procedure, give the dish right back, telling him OK, GOOD BOY. This kind of training shouldn't be practiced more than once or twice a week so as not to make the dog frantic about losing his food. Once he's trustworthy, you won't have to worry about the kids handling him while he's eating.

While your thinking safety for kids and dogs, the kids should learn when and when not to handle other people's dogs. Since they love theirs, they might think it's fine to rush up to any good looking dog they see and plant a kiss. Unfortunately, some dogs shun this type of affection.

Basically, no dog should be handled who is alone — a tethered dog, a stray, a fenced dog, a dog waiting politely outside a store or in a car. Sometimes the situation itself will trigger the dog's protective instincts. And there's no one around to tell you that he's friendly and good with kids. If the owner is around, children should ask if they may pet the dog. Safety insured, a nice friendship may ensue.

Touchy Situations

If a dog is hurt, even your own loving one, it's better to let an adult do the handling. Unless the kids are older and experienced, they may unwittingly hurt the dog. And an injured dog, beside himself in pain, may bite just because he's hurting and confused. Once bitten, the kids may harbor a long term fear of dogs, a sad situation which can usually be avoided.

Fear of dogs which stems from an unfortunate experience with an aggressive dog can often be allayed with sensitive handling and gentle encouragement. But sometimes a child's fear has little to do with a real experience. Sometimes the unconscious plays tricks. The dog may become a symbol for the rage and aggression that the child himself feels and has no outlet for. Since his feelings are taboo, he'll feel guilty about them and may try to place them elsewhere. He may even fancy that angry dogs wish to bite him because he's bad. Naturally, this kind of fear is harder to assuage than the other. But some understanding talk about feelings and some low key contact with gentle dogs can often turn the tables. Even if a child chooses not to share bed and Teddy Bear with a canine, it's nice to feel on friendly terms with creatures so abundantly present in our society.

Jealousy

Another unusual phenomenon can occur when a new dog joins the family. Everyone will fuss over the puppy. He'll be fed often, watched, admired and carried around. He'll be the center of attention. To the youngest child, a puppy may be every bit as much a threat as a new baby in the house. If your child feels he's lost the spotlight, he's no longer the baby, he may get very jealous. Signs of this strange kind of "sibling rivalry" can be both obvious and subtle. But the problem is not difficult to handle once you see it and understand it.

If your child doesn't like the new addition or wants to "send it back", be suspicious. Watch for sneaky behavior. Your child may avow undying love for the puppy and then pinch it or drop it "accidentally" when no one seems to be looking. So look! If every time you pick up the puppy to cuddle it, there's a little somebody tugging at your arm or thirsty for a drink, you'll have to take some positive action. Give away the puppy? Nonsense! Reassure your child, silly as you may feel, that you love him still, that you love him forever, that you love him best. Could it hurt? Just as you would think to lavish a little extra attention on your first born to help soften the blow of the arrival of your second, so the same when the puppy arrives. Play with your child a little extra. When jealousy crops up, ignore the puppy — at least when your child is looking. And let him overhear you bragging about *him* a little before you tell your sister that Little Caesar got housebroken in only two days. That way any child can feel free to love a new puppy without feeling threatened.

With a small amount of training, kids and dogs can live in wonderful harmony, respecting each other, teaching each other, giving each other courage, confidence and love. A dog will happily accept all kinds of strange attention from kids. I've never met a dog yet who didn't like to hear a good story, sit in on a game of Monopoly or hear a pleas-

ant song, even a little out of tune. They are super company on long walks to anywhere and almost never tire of retrieving a ball, fetching a stick, racing and following along on a bicycle trip. They are, in fact, tireless companions while most parents are not. For an active, busy parent, a dog can now and then serve as an affable and willing stand-in. With any luck, he and your offspring will not transmit bad habits back and forth — your dog will probably never leave his clothes all over the house and your child won't shed all over your couch. But they will enjoy a special rapport, saved exclusively for each other, and possibly keep each other in better balance and better spirit than either would have alone. And while I cannot vouch for a dog's proclivity for nostalgia, certainly your child will remember, long into adulthood, as you and I do even today, the sweetness and the fun of his childhood dogs.

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