



Kids and Dogs

The formula for keeping children and canines safe is simple: Parents need to be attentive, assiduous about management, and quick to separate them at the first sign of the dog's discomfort.



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Is the child about to be bitten? Or does the dog adore the kid? We don't know! This is a stock photo! The dog may be trying to avoid the child, or just turning her head . . .

However, we can say that this isn't something that you should allow your child to do with any but the most rock-solid, kid-loving dog – and if this is the only type of dog your child has experience with, you will have to make sure he doesn't have the opportunity to try it with dogs whose kid-tolerance is unknown.

These days, it seems that every time someone posts a picture on social media of a child with a dog it is immediately followed by a spate of posts expressing horror at the anticipated savage attack likely to follow.

Granted, some of those photos do, indeed, show dogs displaying body language signals that suggest a significant amount of discomfort at the proximity of the child, and real potential for injury. But many of them also, in my opinion, depict normal, healthy interactions between dogs and young humans.

Dogs and kids have been happy buddies for centuries. While dog bites to children are nothing new (I was bitten by a stray puppy at age five, in 1956) we seem to be much more reactive to them as a culture than we used to be. When did we become a society so phobic about any dog/kid interaction? And, perhaps more important, how do we help people recognize and create safe, healthy relationships between dogs and children?

A commonly quoted statistic states that

some 4.7 million dog bites occur in the U.S. annually, with 42% of the victims age 14 or under.

As staggering as though those numbers may be, and as sensational as the “Dog Mauls Toddler” headlines are, they are also somewhat misleading. A very large percentage of those millions of bites are relatively minor, so the situation isn't nearly as dire as it first appears.

Still, even one preventable child-mauling incident is one too many, and many of them are, in fact, quite preventable.

SUPERVISOR NEEDED

Supervision of interactions between dogs and children is, indeed, critically important, at least until it is crystal clear that the child and dog are safe together. The “You must

supervise kids and dogs!” mantra has been repeated so many times I would be surprised if there's even one parent in the Western world who hasn't heard it.

But here's the rub: A significant number of kids suffer from dog bites even when the parent or other caretaker is directly supervising the interaction. If “supervision” is the holy grail of dog-kid interactions, how does this happen?

It seems that, over the years, as we trainers and behaviorists have repeated “Supervise, supervise, supervise!” until we're blue in the face, we have somehow neglected to do a thorough job of helping parents and caretakers understand exactly what they are looking for when they are supervising.

It's not just about being *present*, it's also about watching closely, preventing the child from interacting inappropriately with the dog, and watching the dog for body language signals that communicate some level of discomfort with the child's presence and/or interactions.

possible age using positive reinforcement-based methods that teach your child the importance of cooperation and respect, so your child learns how to interact appropriately with other sentient creatures. At the same time, you will be strengthening the positive association between your dog and your child.

WATCH THAT BODY TALK

Any time your dog shows any sign of being uncomfortable with your child's presence, you must separate the dog and child to protect them both. Of course, in order to do this you must understand dog body language well enough to recognize when a dog is expressing discomfort.

People often say, "If my dog could only talk..." They actually do communicate! But their mode of communication is body language – and too few humans take the time to learn that language, or "listen" to what the dog is telling us.

In the sidebar below, we share some different ways your dog may be telling you she's uncomfortable. This is an extensive list, albeit not necessarily a complete one. Study it, and then watch your dog for any of these behaviors, both with children present and absent. Any time you observe stress signals from your dog in the presence of children (or elsewhere!) it's wise to take immediate steps to reduce her stress.

If, while you're managing, supervising, and training your dog around kids, you're having trouble determining what your dog is trying to tell you with his body language communications, ask a force-free dog training professional to help you. It could save your dog's life. And your child's. 🐾

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A DICTIONARY OF CANINE STRESS SIGNALS

■ **Anorexia**

Stress causes the appetite to shut down. A dog who won't eat moderate- to high-value treats may just be distracted or simply not hungry, but refusal to eat is a common indicator of stress. If your dog ordinarily likes treats, but won't take them in the presence of children, she is telling you something very important: Kids stress her out!

■ **Appeasement/Deference Signals**

Appeasement and deference aren't always an indicator of stress. They are important everyday communication tools for keeping peace in social groups and are often presented in calm, stress-free interactions. They are offered in a social interaction to promote the tranquility of the group and the safety of the group's members. When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress as well. Appeasement and deference signals include:

- **Lip Licking:** Appeasing/deferent dog licks at the mouth of the more assertive/threatening/intimidating member of the social group.



- **Turning Head Away, Averting Eyes:** Appeasing/deferent dog avoids eye contact, exposes neck.

*What we see here:
Lip licking/tongue flicks
Turning head away*

- **Slow movement:** Appeasing/deferent dog appears to be moving in slow-motion.

- **Sitting/Lying Down/Exposing Underside:** Appeasing/deferent dog lowers body posture, exposing vulnerable parts.

■ **Avoidance**

Dog turns away, shuts down, evades touch, and won't take treats.

■ **Barking**

In context, can be a "distance-increasing" stress signal – an attempt to make the stressor go away.

■ **Brow Ridges**

Furrows or muscle ridges in the dog's forehead and around the eyes.

■ **Difficulty Learning**

Dogs (and other organisms) are unable to learn well or easily when under significant stress.

■ **Digestive Disturbances**

Vomiting and diarrhea can be a sign of illness – or of stress; the digestive system reacts strongly to stress. Carsickness is often a stress reaction.

■ **Displacement Behaviors**

These are behaviors performed in an effort to resolve an internal stress conflict for the dog. They may be performed in the actual presence of the stressor. They also may be observed in a dog who is stressed and in

isolation – for example a dog left alone in an exam room in a veterinary hospital.

- **Blinking:** Eyes blink at a faster-than normal rate
- **Nose-Licking:** Dog's tongue flicks out once or multiple times
- **Chattering Teeth**
- **Scratching** (as if the dog suddenly is very itchy)
- **Shaking off** (as if wet, but dog is dry)
- **Yawning**

■ Drooling

May be an indication of stress – or response to the presence of food, an indication of a mouth injury, or digestive distress.

■ Excessive Grooming

Dog may lick or chew paws, legs, flank, tail, and genital areas, even to the point of self-mutilation.

■ Hyperactivity

Frantic behavior, pacing, sometimes misinterpreted as ignoring, "fooling around," or "blowing off" owner.

■ Immune System Disorders

Long-term stress weakens the immune system. Reduce dog's overall stress to improve immune-related problems.

■ Lack of Attention/Focus

The brain has difficulty processing information when stressed.

■ Leaning/Clinging

The stressed dog seeks contact with human as reassurance.

■ Lowered Body Posture

"Slinking," acting "guilty" or "sneaky" (all misinterpretations of dog body language) can be indicators of stress.

■ Mouthing

Willingness to use mouth on human skin – can be puppy exploration or adult poor manners, but can also be an



*What we see here:
Avoidance (leaning away)
Lowered body posture
Whale eye*

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expression of stress, ranging from gentle nibbling (flea biting) to hard taking of treats to painfully hard mouthing, snapping, or biting.

■ Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders

These include compulsive imaginary fly-snapping behavior, light and shadow chasing, tail chasing, pica (eating non-food objects), flank-sucking, self-mutilation and more. While OCDs probably have a strong genetic component, the behavior itself is usually triggered by stress.

■ Panting

Rapid shallow or heavy breathing – normal if the dog is warm or has been exercising, otherwise can be stress-related. Stress may be external (environment) or internal (pain, other medical issues).

■ Stretching

To relax stress-related tension in muscles. May also occur as a non-stress behavior after sleeping or staying in one place for extended period.

■ Stiff Movement

Tension can cause a noticeable stiffness in leg, body, and tail movements.

■ Sweaty Paws

Damp footprints can be seen on floors, exam tables, rubber mats.

■ Trembling

May be due to stress – or cold.

■ Whining

High-pitched vocalization, irritating to most humans; an indication of stress. While some may interpret it as excitement, a dog who's excited to the point of whining is also stressed.

■ Yawning

Your dog may yawn because he's tired – or as an appeasement signal or displacement behavior.

■ Whale Eye

Dog rolls eyes, flashing the whites of his eyes.



*What we see here:
Avoidance
Brow ridges
Stiffness*

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