

Living Together with Kids and Dogs

This was written after a client called and asked me, "How do I get my sweet puppy to stop using my kids' as a chew toy, and to stop chasing and jumping up on them?" I gave her a few tips that are tried and true. First of all, you need to have a crate for the puppy and create a schedule of 3 to 4 naps a day for the puppy. You also need to structure your day such that when the puppy is in the same room with you and the children that EVERY interaction is supervised. Tethering the puppy to your waist gives you 'hands on' control, without actually using your hands, keeps the puppy near you, and allows you the freedom to move through the house with the children, without always having to crate up the puppy, or put your baby gate up to confine him. When the children come close to you and the puppy, you remain in control of the puppy's behavior and can 'teach' the children how to play with the puppy and interact in a 'calm and positive' manner. Doesn't take much time, a few minutes a day. "OK" she said, "I've been tethering the puppy but never thought of tethering the puppy to me...um, sounds good. But what about biting?"

I gave her a bit of doggy behavior 101 and another technique that included teaching the puppy to do sits and downs, and then incorporating the children into the training, hence, the puppy learns that the children are also in charge of a major resource... his food and earning those little pieces of kibble are done by performing the puppy push-ups for the kids. So now the confidence level of the children rises, giving them a feeling of more control, the puppy learns how to behave around children, how to take food gently and gets great reinforcement for learning his first sit and first down. We also create a little game of 'play-training' that educates everyone, now the puppy is more focused, knows what his new little job is...the play-biting game is slowly replaced with a new way to interact with the children, the 'hand feeding' game, i.e... good manners.

The problems between children and dogs arise out of a lack of information and education. I frown on Rough housing with a dog by children and when this form of 'play' is done by adults, it can be carried over to the children by the canine. Rough play should not be done until absolute control over the dogs behavior is as "near" to 100% controllable as possible, which of course takes a lot of maturity and training for the dog and the owner too. Dogs are still domesticated animals and if not trained, managed and controlled will simply act like dogs...which they are, this fact should never be forgotten.

When parents take the lead in training the puppy, children are learning from the parents.

My own children have grown up watching me train my dogs and have learned, through observation and supervised interaction, that playing with a dog does not include rolling on the floor wrestling. I shaped an 'attitude' in my children's behavior, which avoided most of the pitfalls that create dangerous situations between dogs and children. Playing with our canine companions is done *through* training. Children often encourage biting and growling behavior without realizing it, getting a dog worked up with high level activity in which control over the dog is lost, this can create so many problems when kids and dogs living together. In order for kids to help train the family dog a relationship needs to be built, and inappropriate play will 'train' the dog to respond poorly to the child, therefore making a child/dog training team difficult.

Always begin with adult supervision, teaching young children how to train a dog enables the parent to 'shape' desirable behaviors and bringing children into the puppy class helps to build that foundation. Family dog training must include the children. Games for kids and dogs are always taught in a training format with lots of rules. That is why I choose to use food as my training tool. I use motivational techniques, whatever the dog likes and enjoys becomes a tool to train. Initially all training and teaching of behaviors is done with food. Its easy, fun, and both kids and dogs learn to enjoy each others company. Children pick up the hand signals very quickly, and the dog learns to respect the children since they are involved in the training process too, and in control of the goodies, i.e., toys, food, games, etc.

A choke chain is a no no on a young puppy start with a flat collar and leather leash. Set aside time so all can be involved, if you don't young children would not have the opportunity to become involved in the training. Food luring, hand signals, hand-feeding, real-life reward training and patience within the family, with children will train the dog, plus time, commitment and love, this is all a perfect recipe for success..