

Are You Protecting Your Kids and Pets During Playtime?

Don't assume that your pet and child will get along immediately — you need to bridge the gap and teach them how to respect each other so that every playtime can be safe and enjoyable.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Children and pets don't naturally understand each other's signals. You need to guide both with patience, teaching them how to respect each other's space and feelings during playtime
- Not every pet is ready for a home with kids. Always check if a new pet is child-friendly before adoption, and make sure your child feels safe, too
- Training isn't just for pets — it's for kids too! Teach your child to approach, touch, and play with animals gently, just as you train your pet to stay calm
- Supervision is your first line of defense. Even well-behaved pets and careful kids need an adult nearby to step in quickly if play gets too rough or stressful
- Knowing when to step back saves everyone. Teach your child to leave pets alone when they are eating, sleeping, or showing signs of stress to avoid accidents

Watching your child and pet play together can be one of life's greatest joys. It's adorable, heartwarming, and often hilarious. But without the proper guidance, it can also lead to trouble. Kids and pets don't naturally understand each other's boundaries, and if things go wrong, the results can be scary for everyone involved.

Your job as a parent is to bridge the gap between them. You need to teach your child how to interact safely with animals while helping your pet feel calm and secure around your child. With a little effort, you can create a beautiful, lasting friendship between them that is full of trust, love, and fun.

Understand That Both Kids and Pets Are Still Learning

It's important to remember that neither children nor pets are born knowing how to behave around each other. Kids are still learning basic things, such as how to be gentle, control their emotions, and respect personal space. Meanwhile, pets communicate mainly through body language, not words. A wagging tail, pinned-back ears, or a stiff posture are all ways animals communicate their feelings.

Because they "speak" different languages, misunderstandings are common. A child might think it's funny to pull a dog's tail, not realizing it hurts. A dog might growl when uncomfortable, but a child can misunderstand it as a form of play instead of a warning — this could result in them getting accidentally harmed. That's why you can't expect either one to figure it out alone — you have to step in and guide them.

Think of yourself as the interpreter for their relationship. With your help, both your child and your pet can learn to trust each other and live together peacefully.

Make Sure the Pet Is Kid-Friendly

Not all pets are naturally good with children, and that's OK. Some animals, especially those that have had bad experiences or were not socialized with children when they were young, might feel nervous, scared, or even angry around small humans.

If you've adopted a new pet, ask the shelter or rescue group about the animal's history with kids before bringing them home. If you already have other pets at home, also check if the animal you're planning to adopt gets along with other dogs or cats.

Once at home, observe the animal's behavior around your child — do they seem relaxed and curious? Or tense and fearful? Adopting a pet that is already comfortable with children and other animals will save you a lot of stress and make it easier for everyone to adjust. Forcing a nervous pet to live with children can cause them to act out defensively, and nobody wants that. Work with your local shelter to find a pet with the right temperament to suit your family's lifestyle.

Remember, it's better to wait for the right match than to rush into a situation that could be unsafe for both the pet and your family.

Make Sure Your Child Is Comfortable Too

It's not just about the pet — you also need to be sure your child feels safe and happy around the animal. Some kids are naturally shy around pets. Others might have had a scary experience in the past, like being jumped on or scratched.

If your child is afraid, don't push them to interact. Forcing them to pet a dog or hold a cat can make their fear worse. Instead, give your child time to warm up at their own pace. Let them watch the pet from across the room. Let them offer treats from their hand if they feel ready. Celebrate small steps without pushing for big ones.

When you allow your child to build confidence slowly, you create an environment where trust grows naturally. Over time, your child may go from being scared to being best friends with the pet.

Train Your Pet and Your Child

Good relationships are built on good communication, and that takes training. For pets, training helps them learn how to behave around kids. Teach simple commands like "sit," "stay," "come," and "leave it." These commands give you more control during playtime and can prevent accidents before they happen.

Reward your pet when they behave calmly around your child. Treats, praise, and petting go a long way in building positive associations. If needed, work with a professional trainer who has experience with pets and kids.

At the same time, you must also educate your children on how to behave around animals and to treat them kindly. Teach them how to pet softly with one hand instead of grabbing with both. They should also try to approach a pet from the side, not from above or behind. Make them understand that pulling ears, tails, or fur, even if the animal seems to

tolerate it, is never okay and can hurt their furry best friend.

Remind kids that animals have feelings too, even if they can't talk. Helping your child see pets as living, feeling beings will encourage kindness and respect.

Always Supervise Their Time Together

Even if you trust both your pet and your child, you should always supervise when they're together. Things can change in an instant. A child might accidentally step on a paw. A pet might suddenly get scared by a loud noise. Your presence can make all the difference between a safe moment and an emergency.

Stay close enough that you can step in quickly if needed. Observe their body language — both the child's and the pet's. Look for signs of stress, such as a tense body, pinned ears, growling, whining, or backing away. If either the child or the animal looks uncomfortable, separate them gently and give everyone a break.

Supervision isn't just about preventing accidents. It's also a chance to teach good habits. You can praise gentle petting, encourage calm behavior, and help both your child and your pet build positive memories together.

Know the Warning Signs of Stress

Animals rarely lash out without warning. They usually give lots of little signs first, and it's up to you to notice them. Some common signs that a pet is feeling stressed, scared, or overwhelmed include:^{1,2}

- Panting when not hot or tired
- Vocalizations, like growling or low, rumbling sounds
- Showing teeth or baring fangs
- Tense, stiff body instead of relaxed
- Tail tucked tightly between the legs
- Ears flat against the head
- Whale eye (when you can see the whites of their eyes)

If you spot any of these signs, it's time to step in immediately. Gently move your child away from your pet and give the animal some quiet time to recover. Teaching your child to recognize these signs can also be a powerful tool. When kids know how to "listen" to a pet's body language, they can avoid pushing too far and upsetting their furry companion.

In addition, remember that babies and toddlers should never be left alone with pets, unsupervised, according to an article in Positively. "Canine body language is tricky to read, and young children simply cannot do it on their own. In order to keep everyone safe, an adult should always be in the room and actively paying attention to both."³

Set Up a Safe Space for Your Pet

Whenever you feel stressed or anxious, there's likely a space you run to — a room or a nook in your garden — where you can sort your feelings and help you calm down. Pets are the same way; they need a "safe zone" where they can rest, relax, and escape from excitement. This could be a cozy dog crate (with the door open) or a dog bed in a quiet room,

where young children cannot disturb them.⁴ For cats, a high cat perch that kids can't reach will be great.

Make sure your child knows that their pet's safe space is off-limits to them — No chasing, grabbing, or following. Respecting a pet's need for quiet time helps them feel secure, and it builds trust between you, your child, and your pet.

Keep These Playtime Do's and Don'ts in Mind

Playtime is where most bonding happens, but it's also where accidents can occur if you're not careful. When letting your child play with your pet, here are a few reminders to keep in mind:^{5,6}

Do:

- Encourage calm games like rolling a ball or tossing a toy
- Teach your child how to play fetch or hide treats for a fun scavenger hunt
- Use treats to reward gentle behavior and quiet voices during play
- Separate your child's toys from your pet's to avoid territorial behavior

Don't:

- Engage in harmful activities like roughhousing, wrestling, or tug-of-war
- Lift or ride large dogs like a pony
- Tease your pet. Like pulling ears or pretending to steal toys

Keeping games structured and low-energy keeps everyone's excitement under control. A tired, overexcited pet is much more likely to act out than one who has been playing gentle, positive games.

Teach Kids When to Leave Pets Alone

One of the most important lessons your child needs to learn is when not to interact with a pet. Tell your child to leave the pet alone during:

- **Mealtimes** — Just like people, pets can get protective of their food. Never try to touch their food bowl while they're eating. Don't touch them when they're chewing on a treat.
- **Naptimes or bedtime** — Waking a pet suddenly can cause a startled reaction, even a snap or scratch.
- **During potty breaks** — Let your pet do their business without interrupting them.

Explain it in a way your child understands: "How would you feel if someone grabbed your plate away at dinner?" or "Imagine if someone woke you up by pulling your hair." Using examples kids can relate to makes it easier for them to understand why respecting a pet's space is important.⁷

Remember These Tips When Meeting New Dogs

Children who are used to living with a pet animal often assume that they can easily approach other animals as well, even those that they don't know or are still unfamiliar with. When meeting a new dog, check first that the animal is friendly and used to strangers. Ask the owner if your child can approach their pet. Once they agree, make sure your child follows this process:⁸

1. Stand still and let the dog come to you; don't invade their space.
2. Hold out your hand slowly so the dog can sniff it.
3. Pet gently on the chest, side, or back, not the head. Use one hand instead of grabbing the pet with both hands.
4. Stay calm and quiet the whole time.

Always remind your child that it's OK if the dog doesn't want to say hello. Respecting the dog's choice is just as important as wanting to pet them. In addition, educate them not to approach a dog that has been tied up outside a house. Petting dogs that are "working" — such as service dogs, search and rescue dogs, and assistance animals — is also not advisable, especially when they are on duty.

How to Handle a Scary Situation

Sometimes, a child might get scared when a dog gets too close to them. Here's what you should teach them:

- Stay still like a tree (no running, screaming, or waving arms)
- Look away and turn their body sideways
- Be boring so the dog loses interest and moves away
- Slowly back away once the dog has lost interest

If a dog knocks them down, tell your child to curl into a ball, cover their neck and head with their arms, and stay still until help arrives. Practicing these steps ahead of time can make a huge difference if your child ever faces a scary moment.

You Must Bridge the Gap Between Your Child and Pet

The bond between your child and your pet can be one of the most rewarding relationships in your family. Just remember that it takes careful teaching, patient supervision, and lots of positive encouragement to ensure they get along splendidly.

Remember, you are the bridge that connects them. Teach your child to be kind and respectful, and create a safe environment for your pet where they can feel relaxed. Help guide them through their early mistakes so they can grow together. With your help, your child and your pet can build a friendship full of laughter, loyalty, and love — one that will stay with them for life.

Sources and References

^{1,6} [Countryside Animal Hospital, How to Stay Safe and Have Fun When Kids and Pets Play](#)

^{2,3,7,8} [Positively, Child/Dog Safety Guide](#)

