

Helping Kids Play Safely With Puppies

Strategies for helping kids and puppies get along.

Maryann Mott

When Jesse Cruz of Dayton, N.J., took home a Shih Tzu puppy, things didn't go smoothly. The playful pup, Chloe, constantly jumped and nipped at her 6-year-old daughter's legs, hurting her. My daughter used to cry and stress over not being able to control the situation, she says.

Cruz, like many parents, discovered that kids and dogs don't instantly become best friends. Instead, it's up to parents to teach children how to properly and safely interact with puppies.

Canine behavior consultant Jennifer Shryock of Family Paws in Cary, N.C., regularly works with parents who are struggling to create kid-and-canine harmony at home.

Sadly, many have the expectation that a puppy and their kids should be able to get along and tolerate one another, she says. This backfires as the kids get frustrated with the teething behavior, sharp puppy nails, and excitable behavior.

A trying time for both adults and children is when puppies start getting their adult teeth (between 2 and 10 months of age). To alleviate discomfort, they furiously chew on everything including human fingers and feet. Mouthing and chewing are also ways puppies explore their environment. You can't stop a puppy from teething, but you can take steps so that your child doesn't become his favorite chew toy.

Shryock, who has fostered more than 60 dogs while raising three kids, recommends toddlers and young children sit on Mom or Dad's lap, or stand on a step, to feel more secure around an active pup. Shryock believes that setting up these structured play times during which young children are elevated makes them less accessible to mouthy pups. And if a pup does become overly playful, parents are there to intervene.

Parents can also attach a toy to a long rope and let kids drag it around for the puppy to chase. This should only be done, though, under adult supervision. This game prevents the pup from pawing and nipping at the child because the toy is the target and is placed at a distance.

The bottom line is that toddlers and pups should only be together with supervision, Shryock says. Setting up specific structured activities for the two to engage in is the best way to encourage a safe and fun bond.

For children 8 or older, when the puppy starts biting, Shryock recommends they stand up (if sitting), stay still, and ignore him. The puppy will quickly become bored and look for something else to do. At that point, they can give the dog a toy, which redirects the chewing to an appropriate item.

Children should not push the pup away, scream stop, or run. When kids react this way, dogs think they're playing and will continue to bite.