

A Game the Whole Family Can Play

How to get your kids involved in training.

Pat Miller

Kids and dogs: They go together like peanut butter and jelly. Despite sensational headlines about family canines mauling toddlers, dogs continue to be children's best pals and confidantes, as they have for centuries.

The concern about dog bites is not insignificant. According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, dogs bite approximately 4.7 million humans each year. Children are three times more likely than adults to be bite victims.

Many families acquire dogs or puppies without realizing the need to create healthy dog-child relationships. The Schowalters, in Carmel, Calif., called me because their 4-month-old black Labrador Retriever, Bosco, was terrorizing their 4-year-old daughter, Bonnie. Bosco was a normal pup, but his stiletto puppy teeth were wreaking havoc on Bonnie's tender skin.

By the end of our first session, Bonnie could elicit a Sit from Bosco rather than a jump-and-bite. The other five Schowalter children also participated in Bosco's training over the remaining sessions.

Uniquely suited to happy dog-kid relationships, positive dog-training methods can also teach children that it's not necessary or appropriate to use violence with other living beings. And, involving your children in your dog's training reduces the chances of dog-bites-kid.

Dogs learn in two primary ways. Classical conditioning refers to a dog's associations with her environment. She likes things that carry positive associations and dislikes negative ones. If you expose your dog to gentle children who share treats, she'll probably like children.

With operant conditioning, your dog learns to control her environment in order to make good stuff happen and avoid bad stuff. You use operant conditioning to teach behaviors like Sit, Lie Down, and Come. When you train with treats, you also give your dog a positive association with training.

Involve your kids in training as early as possible. Carry your baby in a chest sling or backpack while you train, and your dog will think having the baby around makes treats happen.