

BASIC SAFETY RULES FOR KEEPING YOUR BABY SAFE AROUND DOGS



by Suzanne Mackay

Statistics:

- ◆ 4.7 million people in the US are bitten by dogs every year
- ◆ More than 50% of dog bite victims are children
- ◆ Dog bites are the second most frequent cause of injury to children
- ◆ Of fatal dog attacks, 7 out of 10 are children
- ◆ Most dog attacks occur at home or in a familiar place
- ◆ Almost 80% of the biting dogs belong to the victim's family or a friend
- ◆ Unneutered male dogs are responsible for a large percentage of attacks

As alarming as the statistics are, the real tragedy is that most of these injuries and deaths could have been prevented if the parents of these children had knowledge of and followed a few basic safety rules. Babies and dogs can be a magical combination when properly managed by responsible parents.

RULE #1: NEVER leave any your baby or unsupervised (this means keeping visual contact with the dog and child **at all times**) with ANY dog – not even your own - not even for a minute. It only takes a split second for a child to make a mistake, which can result in a serious injury. Dogs often act reflexively in self-defense. An innocent gesture such as touching a sleeping dog unexpectedly can cause a lightning-fast bite. **NOTE: if you have a dog with aggressive tendencies or high prey drive (lunges, chases a lot of things) contact a trainer that has experience with aggressive dogs and rehabilitating them. Most dogs can be helped.**

Recommendation: Consider putting a crate or defining a place where the dog can be place easily and quickly (for example when someone knocks at the door)- you cannot turn your back on the dog or walk out of the room, not even for a minute.

RULE #2: If your dog is friendly with most people, don't assume he will be friendly with your baby. Firstly, many dogs do not see babies as human. Babies are small, wiggle, make noises like small animals and compete with your dog for attention. Dogs evolved as predators and instinctively chase moving animals and objects, often without thinking. Furthermore, babies and toddlers are at 'eye level' and unknowingly, they can challenge a dog by looking him in the eye, which may fuel an attack.

Furthermore, just because a dog breed is 'kid friendly' (Retrievers), don't assume any dog, no matter what breed or size will be good around children.

Recommendation: On a leash introduce your dog to your baby. Let the dog sniff the baby and watch the reaction of the dog when the baby cries, screams or moves. If the dog is constantly staring at the baby tell your dog 'NO' or leave it. Make sure the staring stops, as this is the first sign that the dog has alerted on your baby.

Recommendation: Buy a doll that makes similar noises to a child. Have the dog listen to these noises. If the dog barks or lunges at the doll DO NOT PET THE DOG to calm the dog down, correct the dog and ask the dog to sit and praise the dog for doing something right. Petting the dog, to sooth the dog will only fuel the aggression. Calmly talk to your dog, ask him to sit or lie down and pet him or feed him the occasional treat as a reward.

RULE #3: Don't assume that your dog will be good with your new baby, even if your dog is good with other children. Dogs may not like a particular child for whatever reason and make go after the child. Dogs are pack animals and while they may respect other children whom they consider more 'Alpha' and higher in the pack then they are, a baby or toddler may not been seen as higher pack members and the dog will try to put the baby in it's place.

Recommendation: Keep your dog in a crate or separated and give the dog an opportunity to come and see the baby while on a leash and supervised. Use a properly fitted muzzle on the dog if you expect or see problems. The muzzle will keep everyone safer. Dogs need to have their own quiet place where children do not bother them. Test out Exercise Pens or Baby Gate installations to make sure the dog stays back and doesn't jump over them or knock them over.

RULE #4: If you wish to walk your dog and your baby together first train your dog to properly walk and not pull or lunge. When you are ready, walk your dog along side the baby carriage with a sack of potatoes in the carriage, not a real baby. When the dog behaves well when walking beside the empty baby carriage, with another responsible adult place the baby in the carriage and walk the dog alongside.

RULE #5: With a new baby in the house, it is critical that the baby and dog **ARE NEVER AT THE SAME HEIGHT/LEVEL** (as the dog can take this as a challenge and possibly go after the baby – even in play). If the baby is going to be on the couch, the dog should not be. If the baby is placed on the floor the dog needs to be separated into another room. Additionally, do not place car seats on the floor with the baby in it; it sets your baby and your dog up for failure.

Recommendation: To keep the dog off the furniture purchase some plastic matting with little plastic knobs on one side (goes under office chairs). Available at any office products store. Cut it into strips and lay it over the couch (top and bottom) with the knob side up. It creates an uncomfortable place for him on the furniture. You can also purchase a 'scat mat' from petsmart or petedge.com. It is a mat with an adapter that has a (9 or 12V charge). It delivers a small shock when plugged in and is touched by the dog. It's uncomfortable but not dangerous.

RULE #6: Dogs that are part of the family and are indoor/outdoor dogs will be more responsive to you and your wishes. Many new parents become overwhelmed and make the dog an outdoor dog because the dog is unruly, chews the babies toys, jumps, nips etc. These are training issues that the owner needs to address with the dog. Making the dog an outside only dog will usually make the dog more anti-social, needy and unruly.

Recommendation: If your dog has behavior or training issues try to address them before the baby is born or before they escalate. You might also save your yard from certain destruction.

RULE #7: Dogs, babies and food don't mix. Do not allow the dog to sit under the baby and eat food crumbs. Do not allow the dog to lick the baby's hands while feeding the baby. Dogs are very territorial over food and may become aggressive around the food. Separate the dog and baby when you are feeding one or the other. Dogs shouldn't eat the baby's food, toddlers should not be able to crawl and eat the dog's food.

RULE # 8: If you are going to spend time with friends who have dogs or leave your dog with a friend that has a dog, cat or another pet, make sure that their dog and baby will not be casually interacting or be left unattended. If you aren't comfortable with how your friends generally manage their dogs, don't leave your baby with them.

RULE #9: Don't let your dog wander around the car with the baby in it. Now that a baby is in the house, think about where are you going to put the dog when you are transporting the baby.

Recommendation: If you have an SUV, place the dog in the back and install a barrier-nylon ones are very easy to install. If you don't have a SUV, tie the dog off (harness your dog first) on one side of the car to keep the dog and baby apart. If your car is very small, consider muzzling the dog with a soft nylon muzzle.

Note: Do not put your dog in the front seat passenger or driver side. If an airbag goes off it could seriously injure or kill your dog.

RULE # 10: Have a new baby, don't get a new dog: Sometimes people feel that now they have a baby, a dog is necessary to complete the family. Unless you have the time to train and manage a dog don't get a dog until you have the time to take care of the dog. We've talked to many a new parent that has a new baby and a new dog and they are overwhelmed. Because what you really have is two new babies!

RULE #11: Learn to read dog body language. Dogs smile, just like people do. If the dog has his mouth open in the appearance of a smile, tongue out, ears back, eyes sparkling, and tail (or entire rear end) wagging, most likely he is friendly. If the dog is standing very still, mouth closed, tail up and stiff, eyes staring or refusing to look at the child, this dog is likely giving signals that he doesn't want to interact with a stranger. Keep your child away. Additionally, a wagging tail does NOT always indicate that a dog is friendly so watch all the body language and remember, a dog who pulls away, cowers, growls, is stiff or has 'hard eye' is very likely bite if touched.

RULE # 12: You owe it to your dog to give him enough exercise appropriate for his age, size and breed. Having a young child or baby is a big responsibility but so is a dog. Try to make it a priority to spend quality time with your dog.

Recommendation: If you find you don't have time to walk your dog hire a pet sitter or take your dog to doggie daycare or the dog park. The more steam your dog can blow off the better he will behave.

If you are uncomfortable with managing your dog around a baby or toddler, contact a trainer who provides dog/child integration. The trainer can often arrange to be there the day the baby arrives home from the hospital to help the parents set up the proper environment. The trainer can also work with new parents to address training and behavior issues. Kid proofing a dog is a parent's responsibility not the dog's. Keep in mind that not one breed nor one dog is safe in every situation.

By giving your dog enough exercise, structure, leadership and earned affection your relationship with your dog will be more rewarding for you and your children. The answer to keeping your children safe around dogs is NOT to keep them apart. Being casual with dogs will not only result in more problems, but will deprive children of one of the most joyful relationships in life. Instead, we need to educate ourselves on how to understand and respect dogs for the unique creatures they are.

For information on private training or child / dog safety workshops, please call (310) 325 0070. Suzanne and Trevor Mackay own Sunny Dog Place and The Learning Center for Dogs in Harbor City (Los Angeles), CA. We can also be reached at shmackay@mac.com