

# Lessons for Life

*Alicia Obando* discusses ways of managing children and dogs together safely, highlighting the many important lessons children can learn from their pet dogs



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According to the U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook, 63.2% of pet guardians consider their pets to be family members



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Teaching children how to care for their dogs and how to be safe around all dogs fosters responsibility, confidence, and independence

According to the American Pet Products Association (2019), 67% of U.S. households now own at least one pet, which equals an estimated 84.9 million homes. The U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook (2012) states that, in 2011, 63.2% of pet owners considered their pets to be family members. So this means there are millions of U.S. households with pets that live in their homes as valued family members.

Many of these families also have children, or will be expecting children at some stage. That is a lot of families who could potentially face some of the challenges that can arise when raising kids and dogs together.

Too often, I have seen pets being acquired as a spur of the moment thing with little – or even no – preparation or research. But bringing a pet into the family is a big, potentially life-changing decision that can impact everyone in the household for up to 15 years or more. It is a decision that should not be made lightly. So I believe it can be immensely helpful to seek advice from a pet care professional when making such a big decision.

## Big Decision

First, the family needs to be all-in on this decision. The child may be the one begging for a dog, but the parents/guardians need to want a dog

too, as they will be the ones ultimately responsible for his care. Not having all adults onboard with this decision may increase the possibility of trouble down the road.

Once everyone is on board with the decision to get a dog, the family can then sit down with a pet care professional to discuss what kind of dog they want, what their lifestyle looks like, what their expectations are, and how much time and money they are willing and able to set aside for this new family member. Dogs take a lot of time and money to care for properly. An honest assessment of how much the family can give is critical to making the big decision.

Once all the information is gathered, the pet care professional can help the family come up with the kind of dog that would be a good fit based on his/her size, age, temperament, exercise needs, grooming needs and medical needs. The search can then begin. It is helpful to have the kids as part of the discussion and search process, so they can learn about the process from the very start.

## In the Home

Preparing the home for the arrival of the dog is the next step. Where will he eat, sleep, play? Who will feed him, walk him and play with him? The family will need to buy all the necessary supplies and set up the dog areas before the dog comes home. Again, having the children partici-

pate in this process helps to educate them on what the dog will need and gets them to buy into participating in the care of that dog.

The next important element in preparing for the dog's arrival is for all family members to learn about canine communication and behavior. The adults need to be aware of how the dog communicates stress so that they can try to minimize its occurrence. School-age children can also learn to use their own eyes to assess this. Learning how to identify canine stress signals and what things usually cause stress can help to prevent stressful situations. Or, as Family Paws (2020) puts it: "Ears, Eyes, Tail, Muzzle, gather the clues to solve the puzzle!"

Children should learn that you need to leave dogs alone when they are sleeping or eating. They should also learn that dogs can be sensitive to loud noises and sudden movements and that these things should also be minimized around them. Everyone should also learn the best way to pet a dog – invite them in, pet them along their side or in their favorite spot, and pause to let them leave if they are done. Giving the dog a choice whether to interact or not is essential, and whatever he decides must be respected.

### Parental Supervision

For families that have children under the age of 10, parental supervision is very important. And children under the age of 5 should never be left alone with a dog. It only takes a second for something to go wrong and someone to get hurt. Baby gates and dog crates can be used as management tools to keep the dog and child safely apart, as needed.

It is a good idea for parents to start teaching appropriate touch early on. Babies and young toddlers do not have well-developed fine motor skills, so they cannot be expected to know how to pet gently. Parents will want to guide their hands while petting their dog. As the children get older, they can be taught to pet the dog along his side or favorite spot. Many dogs do not like to be kissed and hugged, so children should be taught to refrain from doing this.

**Children may tend to generalize that what works in one situation should also work in another similar situation, without discerning the differences in those situations. This can potentially be dangerous when they go to a friend's house and think they can interact with the friend's dog in the same way that they interact with their own dog**

Children may tend to generalize that what works in one situation should also work in another similar situation, without discerning the differences in those situations. This can be potentially dangerous when they go to a friend's house and think they can interact with the friend's dog in the same way that they interact with their own dog at home. Just because their own dog likes to be kissed, does not mean that other dogs, with whom they don't share that same bond, are going to be comfortable with it. It is helpful to talk to kids about how to interact with dogs outside of their own home.

This also applies to dogs children may meet out in the community. It is important that they learn how to greet a dog that another adult is walking on a leash:

1. Ask the adult you are with if it's okay to pet the dog.
2. Ask the person handling the dog if it's okay to pet the dog.
3. If they've had the right education, older kids can also use their own eyes to assess whether the dog looks comfortable and friendly.
4. If the answer to these first three is affirmative, the involved parties can then let the dog decide if he wants to approach.
5. Once the dog approaches, the child can pet the dog along his side or preferred spot — if the dog is still okay with it.

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Children also need to learn what to do if they come across a dog who is loose, without a handler and not on a leash. As per Doggone Safe's Be A Tree program, the child should stand still, 'like a tree,' if they see a loose dog.

Standing still with your arms close by your side and looking down at your feet is a way to appear totally boring and nonthreatening to the dog. The dog might sniff the child and then go on his way. Conversely, screaming and running away are not safe actions around a loose dog. Such behavior may cause the dog to become highly aroused, which could lead to him jumping up, nipping, or even biting the child. If the child ends up in a situation like this, he can become 'round like a rock,' i.e. curl up on the ground to protect the head and torso, until an adult is able to assist (Doggone Safe, 2020).

### Teaching Empathy

Teaching children how to care for their dogs and how to be safe around all dogs are great ways to foster responsibility, confidence, and independence. Another wonderful lesson that kids can learn from dogs is empathy and compassion. Caring for another living being who reciprocates with unconditional love is one of the best parts of living with a dog. Loving and caring for a dog can help kids love and care for other human beings as well. It can also bolster their self-esteem, as they feel the love and acceptance from their dogs.

The final, and most difficult, lesson that dogs can help teach kids is that of loss and grief. Losing a pet may be the first experience of death a child must confront. How to handle grief in a healthy way is an important life lesson that parents can guide their child through.

From the day the dog comes home till the day he crosses the Rainbow Bridge, he will teach the children in the family so many wonderful lessons. While it can be a lot of work for parents to manage this long, and sometimes challenging, relationship, the bond that a child and dog form makes it well worth the effort. ■

### References

- American Pet Products Association. (2019). 2019-2020 APPA National Pet Owners Survey. Stamford, CT: APPA
- American Veterinary Medical Association. (2012). U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook. Schaumburg, IL: American Veterinary Medical Association
- Doggone Safe. (2020). [Be A Tree](#)
- Family Paws. (2020). [Doggie Detective Activity Sheet](#)

### Resources

- [Doggone Safe](#)
- [Family Paws Parent Education](#)
- [Good Dog In a Box](#)
- [I Speak Dog](#)
- [Living with Kids and Dogs: Parenting Secrets for a Safe and Happy Home](#)
- [The Family Dog](#)
- Tudge, N. (2017). A Kids' Comprehensive Guide to Speaking Dog! n.p.: Author

**Alicia Obando** is a child and pet care educator with a Bachelor's in early childhood education and a Master's in counseling children and adolescents. She has worked on behalf of children and families for over 30 years and in the animal welfare arena for over 15 years, recently becoming certified as a pet loss counselor. In 2015, she started her Chicago company, [Pitter Patter Parenting](#), where she offers pet care, education and support to help families manage kids and pets together safely, while honoring the bond that people have with their pets. She works with families individually in their homes, and also teaches pet safety classes to children and expectant parents at various locations around the Chicagoland area.