

## Childproofing Your Dog....a few tips

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Do you remember a dog from your childhood who was so tolerant that you slept on him, hugged him and perhaps even rode him like a pony? Many of us do have memories of dogs that would put Lassie to shame, but the truth is...few dogs are this tolerant. And who knows, our memories may be flawed, those childhood dogs were probably not very happy while they endured those things from us and our playmates!

Children just naturally do various things that canines don't particularly enjoy. Many dogs do not like to be restrained around the neck, and as dogs get older, many have pain issues with their backs and necks. For these reasons, we should always teach children *not* to hug our dogs and of course we should teach children not to do anything that may harm or aggravate a dog. That said, as responsible dog owners, we need to realize that any dog that is around children may, from time to time, be subjected to certain unpleasanties and we can up the dog's tolerance level through a carefully thought-out desensitization program.



Here are a few tips that will help “childproof” your dog.

1. Hugging. When working with an adult dog, start slowly, first by gently laying your arm on top of his shoulders for a moment, while quietly praising him. As soon as he seems to look forward to this type of attention, then progress to draping an arm around his neck, then both arms and eventually (take your time, even if these steps take a few weeks) give him the type hug a child might give. At the beginning, you will be talking in a very soothing tone (goooooood dog, that's gooooood) but as the dog feels comfortable with this behavior, begin to add in a high pitched excited word or two (children say things like “You are so CUTE!!! I love you soooo much!” and very often they are exclaiming these things in an excited, high pitched squeal.)

If you own a fearful dog, or one that has shown aggressive behaviors in the past, do not attempt these exercises, because when you are hugging a dog or restraining it with your arms around his neck, your face is very near his face.

For dogs that react by trying to get away, you simply go back a step and progress slower until he is comfortable, and you may even need to add a click and treat to motivate him to enjoy the exercise. But if you fear your dog may react by snapping or biting, forego the hugging/restraint exercise, because you do not want to get bitten in the face. One of the things I teach children in school programs is that dogs do not have hands to push us away, they only have their teeth. Always teach children never to hug someone else's dog and do not let your children see you practicing the exercise. We teach pups tolerance of these behaviors simply because it is likely that someone is going to hug them, and when it happens, we do not want the dog to feel threatened.

2. Pats on top of the head. When talking to children about the reason they should touch a dog gently on the side of the face instead of banging on the top of the dog's head, I ask school age children to bang themselves on the top of the head, then rub their shoulder, and see which one feels best to them. Unfortunately, adults and children in our country are head-patting people, so

all dogs need to learn tolerance of this behavior. Children tend to either pat too roughly, or do a quick pat and jerk their hand away (which can cause even very friendly dogs to play bite.)

Practice all types of head patting, insisting that your dog sit quietly as you do so. As with hugging, start at a low level and work up.

3. Pulling. Pull gently on your dog's ears, then praise and/or give a treat. Do the same with each leg and his tail---anything a child might be able to grab and extend! Again, children should be taught not to do such things, but a dog that lives with children, or goes out to do educational programs in schools, may occasionally be subjected to it.

4. High pitched voices. Talk to your dogs occasionally in a silly, high-pitched voice, while insisting that they remain sitting or standing quietly. This can be done while practicing a stay command, but eventually your dog needs to remain calm even without your reminder to stay, while you squeal in an excited voice. Not just children, but even adults have been known to squeal in delight when they see a well-groomed pup out in public!

5. Running and screaming. If your dog has a high prey drive, this will be one of the hardest things for them to accept. Work on sit and down-stays first with you providing the run-bys, but eventually work on this exercise in areas where children are nearby engaging in these behaviors. You can go to a public park, and start while children are at a distance, eventually bringing the dog closer when you feel confident that he can withstand this distraction.

Socializing pups at ball game practices also helps desensitize them to children running and people of all ages screaming. Just make sure that you bring something to help you keep your pup calm (such as a blanket for him to lay on, with a chew bone). Never keep a puppy in a situation where their adrenaline level is out of control, as this will simply be teaching the puppy a poor response. If you take a dog or pup to a ball game or similar situation and find he is not yet ready to handle it, simply leave.



6. Bicycles, tricycles and any type of toy a child might ride. As with #5, start by working on a stays while you walk by with the bike (you will need a helper to be beside the dog, encouraging him to stay calm), then you progress to riding and eventually you progress to going to areas where children are on their bikes. Be especially careful with high prey drive dogs around any moving object. For more info, read "Understanding Prey Drive" (found under "Articles" on [www.knowingdogs.com](http://www.knowingdogs.com).)

7. Weird sounding toys. From a baby rattle to the obnoxious sound of a screaming fire truck, dogs can and should be desensitized to the noise of children's toys. If you are pregnant or getting ready to adopt a child, start *now* with all of these exercises. Don't wait until your child is old enough to be playing with the toys, then expect your dog to simply understand and not be afraid. If you visit someone's home and they have children who are running and playing, or playing with loud toys, watch your dog at all times. If needed, put your dog in a safe place away from the children. One negative experience with an unruly child can ruin months of work. Just because we train our dogs to be tolerant does not mean that we neglect to protect them.

No dog can be proofed for every situation they may encounter, but teaching him to accept the unexpected and (to him) irrational, behaviors of children will go a long way towards insuring that he can have safe and happy relationships with little human beings!

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