

Statistics show that a very high percentage of Australian households have pets – we are a nation of animal lovers!

Pets can play a role in teaching children important life lessons, promote a sense of responsibility, and can provide a non-judgemental ‘friend’ for them to confide in.

However, there are risks involved when children and animals interact that need to be carefully managed to ensure that the relationship remains positive for both the pet and the child.

Unfortunately, every year a significant number of children are injured due to incidents with dogs – most commonly their own dog or a friend’s dog. These incidents are often triggered by the child’s interaction with the dog during eating, play or when the dog is sleeping.

Younger children, especially those under 5 years of age, are most at risk of receiving serious injuries, simply due to their head and face being at a level often equal to the dog’s.

As pet owners, we need to play an active part in keeping children and our pets safe, and in ensuring that children are taught the skills to behave safely around animals.



Start by choosing the right breed of Dog for you and your Family

If you are thinking about adding a dog to your family, you need to do your homework and select a breed that is suited to your lifestyle and your living arrangements.

If you have young children, are planning a family, or have elderly or frail family members living with you, that high-energy herding breed or large guardian breed dog may not be the right match at this time in your life.

You also need to consider if you truly have the time to properly socialise, exercise, and train a dog so that it has every chance to be happy and healthy, especially if a lot of your time is taken up by a young family.

There are many resources available online that can help guide your selections and provide you with compatible breeds that you might not have considered.

Why not try the [Dogs Victoria Breed Quiz](#) – answer some simple questions about your lifestyle and expectations to see some breeds that might fit the bill.

Or visit Dogs Victoria’s [‘Are you ready for a dog?’](#) web page

Doing your homework, researching breeds, and being honest about the amount of time you have to dedicate to a pet can set you up for success right from the start!

Make it a priority to properly socialise and train your Dog

Regardless of the breed you choose, and your family’s make-up, all dogs should have opportunities for regular socialisation.

Many people mistakenly think socialisation is all about dog-to-dog interaction at the local dog park, but it is actually about teaching the dog to positively view all the things that are ‘normal’ in their world. This includes regular positive encounters with all sorts of people – from men with hats and beards to children of different age groups.



Your dog should also have some basic 'manners training' – learning to walk nicely on the leash, and to sit and come when called. Ideally, all dogs should also learn to sit quietly in a crate or pen.

Crate training comes in super handy when travelling, visiting the groomer or veterinarian, and provides your dog with a safe space that can be used whenever the dog needs some downtime.

Getting the kids involved in training behaviours helps to promote a positive association and provides children with appropriate ways to interact with the dog. Teaching tricks or fetch with multiple toys can be a great way to promote 'hands off' interactions where everyone has fun.

Teach your Children how to safely behave around animals

It is important that children are taught the skills needed to behave safely around animals and to recognise when an animal is not comfortable being approached or petted.

Teach children to always treat animals calmly and gently and to be kind. They should learn never to hurt, tease, frighten, chase or corner an animal.

Kissing and hugging, although normal for humans, can be frightening for pets. These behaviours also put the child's face right up close to the dog's muzzle. So instead, teach children how to interact without holding, grabbing or restraining the pet.

They should also be taught never to disturb an animal when it is sleeping or eating.

Finally, they need to be taught to leave a dog alone if it lifts its lip, growls, stares at them or backs away from them, or it raises the hair on the back of its neck.

Away from home, children should be taught not to approach or pat unfamiliar dogs, even if they look friendly, and to always ask the owner or a parent if they can pat the dog. They need to understand that not all dogs are comfortable near children.

If they are approached by an unfamiliar dog, they need to be taught to stand still, and not to run or scream.

Parents also need to model correct behaviour themselves. Remember that children learn best by copying what they see others do!

Always supervise and if you can't supervise then separate.

Any dog, no matter how tolerant or 'bomb-proof' it has been in the past, has the potential to bite a child.

Children need constant close supervision when near dogs. Things can change very quickly, so active supervision by an adult who understands what signs to look for is needed whenever interactions are occurring.

If supervision is not possible, or the play is getting out of hand, then separating the kids and the dog is by far the safest option.

Setting up a dedicated 'dog-free' zone for the kids to run and play and make lots of noise will keep your kids safe, and having a 'child-free' place for your dog to relax means that your dog does not get overwhelmed and has a place to retreat to when things get a little over the top.

Make sure that both your kids and any visitors are aware that they are not to interact with the dog when it is in its crate, pen or quiet place.

If your child is going to a friend's or relative's place – make sure that the responsible adults also understand the importance of supervising all of the interactions between the dog and the children.

Need some more resources?

The RSPCA UK has combined with the late Dr Sophia Yin to produce the '[Keeping Kids Safe](#)' booklet that has some fabulous illustrations of dog body language.

And there is also an excellent [blog post by Dr Sophia Yin](#) on how kids should and should not interact with dogs, with simple explanations and pictures.