

Kids, Dogs and Aggression
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Children are the most common dog bite victims in the United States. Children are most often bitten by familiar dogs. How often have you counseled a client whose dog is aggressive toward her child and attempted to help her through the dilemma of what to do? Wouldn't it be easier to have just prepared the dog for the coming of the baby? It goes without saying that it is easier to prevent medical diseases than to treat them after the fact. That is certainly the case with behavioral disorders as well.

Unfortunately, aggression toward children is a common presenting complaint in my practice. The majority of dogs are acting out of fear, anxiety, resource guarding or defensiveness. Once a dog displays aggression toward a child, safety measures have to be taken immediately and permanently to make sure that a child is never injured. Once a dog has displayed aggression and learned that it is an effective coping tool for stressful situations, that lesson cannot be erased. A well designed treatment plan will include behavior and environmental modifications, safety recommendations and recommendations to decrease anxiety. If all goes well, the end result is that the child is safe and the dog is kept in the home. However there is a level of comfort that we can never get back once there has been aggression toward a child. To ignore this fact is to endanger a child and that is unacceptable. This is very difficult for owners to accept. They want to be able to "train" this behavior out of their dog.

To understand what is happening here, you have to understand a why aggression occurs. In dogs, aggression is a last resort strategy. Certainly, there are breeds and personality types that will go to this strategy sooner than others, but at the end of the day it is a last resort. Unfortunately, owners often miss or ignore warning signals such as attempts to escape, fearful or stressed body language, nipping, snapping and growling. They assume that those behaviors will never progress into a bite. The aforementioned signals are warnings. The owner that heeds them and acts on them can keep her kids safe. The one that doesn't, but instead thinks that their pet would never "cross the line" to bite, often ends up with an injured child.

Whenever a dog acts out of fear, anxiety or defensiveness, there is an acute stress response associated. The stress response is simply the body's way of responding to aversive stimuli. When animals experience anxiety or fear, they don't just respond behaviorally, they respond physiologically. Epinephrine and cortisol as well as a cascade of neurotransmitters and neurohormones are released with each response. The effects of these hormones are many including jump starting the body into "fight or flight" mode as well as helping the animal to "remember" the situation and which strategies were most effective in returning the body to physical and behavioral homeostasis. Once there is a stress response associated with a particular situation, greater treatment measures than training must be applied.

If one of your clients tells you that she is pregnant, ask at that time if she has started to prepare her dog for the coming of the new baby. If she has not, set up a second appointment for a brief evaluation of the dog and an assessment of where she should start her baby preparations. The first thing that an owner needs is an honest assessment of the dog's behavior from her primary care veterinarian. It is best that this come from a veterinarian and not a dog trainer or veterinary technician. You are the pet owner's respected source for all that is "dog."

Any dog can bite a child so no matter how fabulous the dog has been in the past, you have to approach each case objectively. A short, two page questionnaire should suffice to initially screen the

dog. If the dog has shown aggression toward someone in the past (e.g., growled, nipped, lunged or bitten), or has anxieties (e.g., separation anxiety) or fears (e.g., fear of new people) he is at greater risk of acting aggressively toward a child than a dog who does not. Questions should be concise. For example, instead of asking if the dog has ever been aggressive, ask if the dog has ever lunged, growled at or put his teeth on a person. When questions are asked in this way (with specific criteria), you are more likely to get accurate information. If the dog has shown aggression in any way, it is a red flag. These dogs need more in depth behavior modification to accept a child into the family.

Once you have made your initial general assessment, you will need to decide if you will continue with diagnosis and treatment or if you will be referring the case to a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. An accurate diagnosis and treatment plan should be made for all aggression cases. While partnering with a dog trainer or a veterinary technician, can be very helpful in implementing the treatment plan, the diagnosis and treatment plan should be made by a veterinarian as with any other medical disease.

Clients should start preparing their pets as soon as they are aware of the pregnancy to get best results. While baby preparations will not guarantee that the dog will love the baby, it will ease pain of the transition. Preparing a dog for a new baby is not that difficult. If we can intervene before dogs show aggression, we can keep dogs in their original homes, save owners from a heart wrenching decision and keep kids safe.

Below is a general list of baby preparations that every dog should receive prior to the time when the baby comes home. A baby preparation handout which can be given to clients is available at www.flvetbehavior.com. Click on "Veterinarians".

Environmental changes:

1. Teach the dog to accept confinement.
2. If baby gates will be used to confine the dog or keep the dog out of the baby's room, set them up as soon as possible.
3. Set up the baby's room as soon as possible.
4. Set up baby furniture (swings, cribs, bassinets) early.

Behavior modification

1. Teach the dog to walk with the stroller.
2. Habituate the dog to the sounds and sights of the baby by setting up the baby swing and bringing out the basinet as soon as possible. In addition, baby sounds CDs can be played at slowly increasing volumes while the dog is playing or eating dinner.
3. Sharpen up the dog's obedience skills.
4. Get the dog used to any schedule/care changes which will occur after the baby is born.

Safety

1. Never under any circumstances leave a dog alone with an infant or toddler. Even friendly, non-aggressive dogs can see a newborn as they would a squeaky toy or a squirrel. An attempt to play with a newborn could be fatal. This rule has to be steadfast.
2. Do not put the baby in the dog's face. This is a direct intrusion into the dog's space and is not an appropriate way to introduce a dog to a child.
3. Do not assume that a lick means the dog likes the child.
4. The dog should never be in the baby's room without adult supervision.
5. As the child ages, she should learn proper boundaries with the dog.