

# Children and Dogs: Important Information for Parents

Living with a pet can be beneficial to children. Pets can enhance a child's self-esteem, teach them responsibility and help them to learn empathy. However, children and dogs are not always going to automatically start off with a wonderful relationship. Parents must be willing to teach the dog and the child acceptable limits of behavior in order to make their interactions pleasant and safe.

## SELECTING A DOG: WHAT AGE IS BEST?

Many people envision a puppy and a child growing up together. If you have a young child and are thinking of adopting a puppy (less than one year old) there are a few things you need to consider.



- **Time and energy:** Puppies require a lot of time, patience, training and supervision. They also require socialization in order to become well-adjusted adult dogs. This means they need to be taken places and exposed to new things and new people. If you have a young child who already requires a lot of care and time, will you have enough time to care for a puppy, as well?
- **Safety:** Puppies, because they're babies, are somewhat fragile creatures. A puppy may become frightened, or even injured, by a well-meaning, curious child who wants to constantly pick him up, hug him or explore his body by pulling on his tail or ears.
- **Rough play:** Puppies have sharp teeth and claws with which they may unintentionally injure a small child. Puppies also tend to jump up on small children and knock them down. All interactions between your child and puppy will need to be closely supervised in order to minimize the chances of either being injured.
- **Advantages of getting an adult dog:** Adult dogs require less time and attention once they've adjusted to your family and household routine, although you'll still need to spend time helping your new dog with the transition to his new home. You can better gauge how hardy and tolerant an adult dog will be of childish enthusiasm and you can work with your local animal shelter to adopt a dog with a history of getting along well with children. As a general rule, if your child is under six years old, it's best to adopt a dog that's over two years old. Although puppies can be a lot of fun, and it's exciting and rewarding to help them grow into wonderful companions, they do require significantly more time to train and supervise than an adult dog.

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## SELECTING A DOG: WHAT BREED IS BEST?

Although some general statements can be made about specific dog breeds, the characteristics of an individual dog are just as important as a dog's breed.

- **Breed type:** Some of the sporting breeds, such as Labradors and Golden Retrievers, make good pets for families with children. Breeds that have been selected for protective behavior, such as chows and Rottweilers, may not be as good for families with children. It's sometimes difficult for this type of dog to comfortably tolerate the coming and going of children and their friends, who may be perceived as territorial intruders. Herding breeds are inclined to "herd" children, chasing and nipping at their heels.
- **Size:** Small breeds of dogs, such as toy or Miniature Poodles, Chihuahuas or Cocker Spaniels, may not be good choices for a young child. These small breed dogs are more easily injured than larger dogs and may be more easily frightened by a lot of activity, loud noises and by being picked up and fondled frequently. Frightened dogs tend to snap or bite in order to protect themselves. Larger dogs may be better able to tolerate the activity, noise and rough play that is an inevitable part of living with children.

## WHO WILL CARE FOR THE DOG?

It's unrealistic to expect a child, regardless of age, to have sole responsibility for caring for a dog. Not only do dogs need basic things like food, water and shelter, they also need to be played with, exercised and trained on a consistent basis. Teaching a dog the rules of the house and helping him become a good companion is too overwhelming a task for a young child.

While responsible teenagers may be up to the task, they may not be willing to spend an adequate amount of time with the dog, as their desire to be with their friends usually takes over at this age. If you're adopting a dog "for the kids," you must be prepared and willing to be the dog's primary caretaker.