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## Guide to Children and Dog Safety

According to the Humane Society of the United States, 50 percent of children will be bitten by a dog before their 12th birthday. Children under the age of 5 are most likely to be bitten and most of these bites come from a dog that the child knows, e.g., the family dog or that of a relative or friend. So why are children more likely to be bitten by dogs than adults? A child moves faster than an adult and a fast movement can sometimes illicit a dog's chasing instinct and stimulates its prey drive. Children talk in higher pitched voices than adults, which can sometimes startle a dog and make it fearful. They can frustrate a dog by rough play and teasing, or they can inadvertently inflict pain with the pull of a tail or a poke in the eye. Younger children are closer to a dog's eye level, making it easier for a dog to feel threatened by eye-to-eye contact and for the child to be bitten in the face. It is also much harder for a child to read and understand a dog's body language and, therefore, miss vital signals that can put them in harm's way.

### How should children protect themselves?

Parents and guardians need to be responsible for their dog at all times, without exception, and especially around children. A child should never be left unsupervised with a dog at any time, and dog and child should only be together when a responsible adult can actively supervise. This keeps both children and dogs safe. Education for parents and children is essential. It amazes me that adults seem to be more ignorant than children about how children should greet a dog.

The following true story shows exactly what I mean. A handler was holding the leash of what seemed to be a very friendly rescue dog that had just come into the shelter. As I was standing in the room with the dog and the handler, a family came in with their 6-year-old daughter. The girl approached the dog and, without asking the handler, took the dog's face in her hands and kissed it on the nose. The handler asked the girl's parents to take her away from the dog as its history was uncertain and the dog's reactions couldn't be predicted. The parents replied that the handler was not to worry because the child had a dog of her own and was great with dogs. Now, if the parents didn't realize that they had just put their child in harm's way by allowing her to greet a dog like that, there was no hope for the child. What they should have taught her was NEVER to approach a dog that she didn't know without asking the handler first and to never kiss a dog on the nose. If the child had been bitten, the dog and its handler



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would have been blamed, when the real blame should have been with the parents. Fortunately, in this instance, the dog was very friendly and no one got bitten, but you get my point.

Dogs make wonderful companions and need to be treated with care and respect. Most dogs are very friendly and will not bite; however, there are some dogs that show aggression for reasons such as fear, anger, frustration or protection. It is vital that you recognize the signs that a dog is about to bite. Some dogs will growl, tense up, or bark aggressively at you while other dogs will give no visible warning, and this is why it is so important that you follow this guide to keep yourself safer.

1. Never touch a dog that is unknown to you.
2. Even if you know the dog, always ask permission to pet it from the owner first.
3. Even when you have permission, don't invade the dog's body space. Allow the dog to come up to you and sniff the top of your closed fist (palm down). If the dog doesn't want to come and greet you, respect that and leave it alone. Don't approach a dog from behind. Don't pet a dog directly on the top of its head. This could be threatening for the dog because the top of its head can be very sensitive, so it is best to pet on the back or chest.
4. Never stare at a dog and never put your face close to a dog's face. Remember to look at the dog briefly and then look away, look at the dog, and look away. These are calming signals and you are telling the dog that you are no threat.
5. Do not tease a dog.
6. Do not touch a dog that has been tied up or left at the end of a chain in a yard, outside a store or behind a fence.
7. Tell an adult immediately if you see a dog that is loose in your neighborhood. Do not touch it.
8. Do not touch a dog while it is eating. You wouldn't want a dog to come and take what you are eating, so respect that its food is its food and you should not go near it.



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- 9.** Do not touch a dog while it is sleeping. You might startle it and it could react without thinking and snap at you.
- 10.** Do not take a bone or toy away from a dog if it is playing with it.
- 11.** Do not push a dog off the sofa or chair if you want to sit there. Always get an adult to remove the dog for you.
- 12.** Don't scream and run away from a dog. If a strange dog comes up to you and you are scared, fold your arms, stand still, look away, and completely ignore it until it loses interest in you and goes away. The more boring you can be the less the dog will want to interact with you. If you can, walk slowly away with folded arms.
- 13.** If the dog tries to bite you, put a bag or coat between you and the dog and back away to a safe place.
- 14.** In the unlikely event a dog starts to bite, get onto the floor, roll up into a ball with your arms around your head, and stay as still as you can until help arrives.
- 15.** Remember that a dog is an animal and not a cuddly toy. Some dogs don't like being hugged. Be gentle with any dog and do not engage in rough play.

Seems like a lot of dos and don'ts but it is very important. If you print out the safety guide and put it up where you can see it, the tips will be easier to remember.

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