

How to choose a kid-friendly dog

By Wendy van Kerkhove
www.freshairtraining.com

As a dog trainer I am often asked which breed of dog is good with children. I always grimace when I hear this question because I know that I will have to deliver the news: A dog of any breed, including mixed breeds, can be great with children... or not.

First, the gloom and doom: Dogs are animals and any dog, given the right circumstances can and will bite. However, many dogs live their entire lives without biting anything or anyone. What is important to know is that within every breed there are dogs that will bite. Most breed books want you to believe that each specific breed consists of a preset combination of characteristics. This is not so; nature is variable. Just consider your own family and think about how different each child can be even though each is born of the same parents. While it is true that certain breeds have been selectively bred for specific traits (think Border Collie or Pit Bull) even those breeds have dogs within them that do not fit the behavior profile at all.

The goal of this article is to help you make the best possible educated choice when choosing a puppy or adult dog that will be good with your children.

Choosing a Puppy

Whether you are choosing a puppy from the local shelter or from a breeder you should follow these basic guidelines

1. Bring your children with you and let them do what children do with a litter of puppies, within reason. Your kids will want to grab at the pups, hug them and pick them up in a total inappropriate manner. Invariably, there will be pups that stay for the “fun” and ones that retreat from the “hell”. A best bet would be to choose the pup that thinks the manhandling is fun. A puppy that is leery of your children from the get go will probably not be a good choice for your family. If your children want to pick the pups up by the neck, throw them around or hang them upside down from their tails, they are probably too young to have a puppy.
2. If you go to a breeder for a purebred puppy, you will want to check out where the pups and mom are being kept. You will want to see that the pups are being kept inside the home and being exposed to everything from strangers to the vacuum cleaner. Starting at about three weeks, the pups need to be exposed to a variety of life’s experiences. If the breeder does not let you see where the pups or mom are kept, or if they are kept in social isolation with just other dogs, run with your tail between your legs. If you see what you consider abhorred conditions, please call the animal investigations department at the Animal Humane Society at (763) 489 2235.
3. Understand that as puppies mature into dogs, they change. There is no guarantee that the puppy you bring home today that can take all the manhandling your children can

deliver now will stay that way as he ages. The only thing you can say is that right now, at this age, the pup is okay with the children. This is the best you can do.

4. Don't be fooled into thinking that if you buy a puppy from a breeder, and you are told that the dog is "from a line of champions" that you are necessarily getting a pup with a rock solid temperament. The only thing that you are buying is a dog whose descendants most closely fit the breed standard as defined by the AKC in the eyes of the judge that day.

Choosing an adult dog

An adult dog is often a good choice for a family with children. Assuming the dog has hit social maturity (somewhere between nine months and two years), there is a good chance that what you see is what you'll get. This means that if the dog can handle having his tail pulled, being hugged and flopped upon, there is a good chance that he will tolerate it when he is living with you. But again, there are no guarantees. The adult dog that was perfect at the shelter may act differently once he is in your home and has become acclimated to your family. Even an adult dog from a breeder can come with issues.

Now the good news: While there is no such thing as a "sure thing" there are many dogs that go through their lives without ever biting a soul. That puppy that loves to be manhandled by your children may grow to love it just as much when he is an adult dog. The stray dog that you adopt from the shelter that covers your kids with kisses when you visit may very well stay that way for years to come. And the good news is that if your dog becomes intolerant to your children or their friends, the problem may be solved through behavior modification, drug therapy, management or a combination of all three.