

## **Toddlers and Puppies, Pt. 2**

Rebecca Mason CPDT-KA, CTDI, M.Ed.

Last month I talked about safety issues between puppies and toddlers. Now I want to share some strategies I used when my own son was little.

First, never leave your dog and toddler alone together. When my son was three, I left him in the room with my dog for just a moment while I popped into the kitchen, but in that brief time, my son lost his balance, fell on the dog, and was nipped. My dog is very small, so seeing a “giant” about to fall on him, he responded defensively. This could happen to anyone when your child and dog are left unattended. Just don’t do it! Be physically present at all times. If you have to leave the room, either take your child or pup with you, or place your pup in a containment pen (ex-pen) or crate until you return.

Just as important as being physically present is being mentally present. Being in the room doesn’t help if you’re texting or doing dishes. You must have your eyes on your dog and child and watch for stress signals that say, “I’m not comfortable with this.” Examples are the dog yawning, licking its lips, turning away, trying to move away, opening its eyes wide, becoming very stiff or still, and more. Also watch for inappropriate behavior from your child, like hugging and kissing (which dogs consider a threat), grabbing, squeezing, poking, hovering over or cornering the dog, etc. Separate your dog and child if you see any of these things.

Common safety concerns are things like the child being knocked down, or the dog licking or playfully nipping the child’s face or hands and scaring the child in the process. In situations like this, since a young pup or untrained dog isn’t going to respond to commands they haven’t been taught, management is key. Management involves preventing your dog from practicing these behaviors and keeping him busy. Aside from supervision, common management strategies include:

- Use an ex-pen so your pup can be in the room with you but not clobber your child.
- If in the yard together, hold your child or let him sit in his stroller or high chair so your pup can’t reach him.
- Utilize parallel play, where you sit between your child and dog. You and your child can play while your dog enjoys a bone or a Kong filled with xylitol-free peanut butter.
- Tether your dog to a piece of heavy furniture and give him a bone so he is occupied, not lunging at barking on the leash. (Note: If tethering, it is especially important that you do NOT allow your child to approach your dog while he is on the tether. Your dog may feel trapped and this could result in fear-based nipping.)
- Make sure no one is using hands as toys or weapons. Hitting will make your dog want to bite, and using your fingers to play will make him want to nip too. Use plushies or tug toys to play, not your hands.
- Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise. Take a walk together with your child in his stroller, or have one parent exercise the dog while the other entertains the child.

Some dogs love to chew on kids’ toys or pick up dropped pacifiers. Keep your child’s toys up high or in bins, or put up baby gates to keep your dog out of your child’s room. For me,

this was a lifesaver! Also make sure you are providing your pup with a variety of toys and bones and rotate them each day so he doesn't lose interest.

Some dogs will try to escape when kids don't shut the door. We installed a deadbolt up high on our door where our son couldn't reach and kept it bolted at all times. Another option is door knob safety covers that prevent kids from opening doors.

While it will take months for your dog to master the safety commands you need them to know (come, stay, wait at doorways, leave it, drop it), start training early! Seek out a certified trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods, but keep in mind your dog's age, breed, and temperament, and remember to have reasonable expectations. A dog who can sit and stay in a quiet room may not be able to sit and stay while someone opens the door! Baby steps...

***Rebecca Mason is a certified dog trainer and owner of Love Them Train Them LLC in Birmingham. She is a former elementary school teacher and is passionate about working with families to channel their dogs' energy positively.***