

Dogs and kids – preventing dog attacks and bites

Information for parents and caregivers

Dogs and kids

In many families, dogs play a very important role as companion and friend, and are much loved family members. In fact Australia has one of the highest rates of dog ownership in the world. However, it is important to be aware that there are risks associated with having children and dogs together, especially children under 5 years of age. Children 12–18 months old are the most vulnerable age group to be attacked by dogs. It may be surprising to know that the dog most likely to bite a child is not a stranger's dog, but is a dog the child knows well.

The majority of dog attacks that require a child to be hospitalised take place in a child's own home or backyard, or at the homes of friends and neighbours.

Due to the size of young children, the most serious injuries are to a child's head and face, often leaving them scarred for life. Eye damage can also occur. Other injuries can be to the arms and legs.

What dogs breeds can attack?

Any dog can pose a risk to children. Some dog breeds have been noted to be more aggressive than other breeds and have higher rates of reported attacks. However, there are also many cross breeds, so classification of dog attacks by breed is unreliable. It is important you look carefully at the type of dog you choose if you are planning to get a dog when you have young children.

There is a website that provides advice on selecting a pet for your family:

www.petnet.com.au

You can also speak to your local vet or animal behaviourist.

The key message is that there are some breeds of dog that do pose a greater risk of attacking young children, but any dog can pose a risk if precautions are not taken to reduce the risk of young children being attacked.

When are dogs more likely to attack children?

Dogs are likely to attack a child if:

- Approached when eating.
- Approached when sleeping.
- Startled by sudden movements.
- Woken suddenly.
- Cornered and scared.
- Jumped on and climbed over.
- They have their ears or tails pulled, or are poked or hit.
- They are looking after puppies.
- They have been cooped up in a hot car.
- They are unwell or injured.
- They are not properly trained.

Preventing dog attacks and bites

The most effective way to minimise the risk is to always make sure that young children (your own, and other people's) are supervised around the dog; otherwise separate the dog from the children when supervision is not possible.

It is important to always reinforce this when visiting relatives and friends. It is important to create dog-free zones for young children, and child-free zones for a dog.

The key message is supervise or separate.

When to get a dog?

Parents are advised to wait until their children reach school age before getting a dog. When buying a dog, the RSPCA recommends matching your family's needs to the type of dog.

If you already have a dog, when you have children, you need to make sure that you prepare the dog properly early in the pregnancy. Familiarising the dog with the smells of the nursery and new furniture is important before you bring the baby home. Then slowly and calmly introduce the dog to the smells and sounds of the baby.

Safety tips

to teach your child at around 2–3 years of age

With dogs they don't know, tell them to:

- Always ask permission from the owner before slowly approaching an unfamiliar dog.
- Approach a dog slowly, with the back of the hand extended.
- Curl their fingers and allow the dog to sniff them.
- Stroke the dog gently on the chest, shoulder, or under the chin. Never pat it on the head.
- Avoid eye contact with the dog.
- Stand still if being approached by a strange dog. Do not squeal, run, or jump.

For approaching all dogs tell your child to:

- Avoid approaching dogs that are sleeping, eating, caring for puppies, unwell or injured, or in their beds or kennel.
- Always let a dog see you and sniff you before patting it.
- Never play with a dog unless supervised by an adult.
- Never yell at or surprise a dog, not even the family pet.
- Not pull a dog's tail or ears, or jump on, or kick a dog.
- Roll into a ball and lie still and quiet if knocked over by a dog.

Useful resources

The Dog and Cat Management Board of SA

Includes an on-line resource titled 'We are family'.

Go to: www.gooddogsa.com/goodowner/we-are-family/

You are also able to get a copy from Kidsafe SA.

Also includes a host of other quality on-line resources.

Go to: www.dogscats.asn.au/site/page.cfm

Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS)

Provides quality on-line information. Go to: www.petnet.com.au/

For more information, contact:

Kidsafe SA Inc.

Women's and Children's Hospital

72 King William Rd,

North Adelaide SA 5006

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Website: www.kidsafesa.com.au

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CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA

www.kidsafesa.com.au