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# Dogs and children

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**ABSTRACT:** It is estimated that over half of all children in the UK will be bitten by a dog at some point in their lives (NHS, 2012). The media have highlighted stories of dog attacks on children, and this has caused much debate about the Dangerous Dog Laws. As members of the veterinary profession we have a duty to ensure that we are giving our dog-owning clients the best possible advice when dealing with dogs and children.

## Introduction

The statistics for hospital admissions due to dog bites show a rise of 37% in incidence between 2007 and 2013 (Channel 4, 2014). I gave birth to my first child in 2012 and I also own a Labrador and a Rottweiler. Throughout my pregnancy I was regularly asked if I was worried about the Rottweiler when there would soon be a screaming baby in the household. My answer was no – I was not worried, but I was aware that I had two dogs that were unused to babies and that I would need to be prepared and careful to ensure that my child was safe, and the wellbeing of my animals was maintained. Interestingly no one seemed at all worried about the fact I have a Labrador as well and indeed it is a common misconception that certain breeds are more likely to attack a child. The truth is that my Rottweiler is actually far more tolerant of my toddler than my Labrador who tends to avoid him at all costs!

Advising owners that there are breeds that are 'good with children' can be a dangerous generalisation. There is evidence that the sensitive period of socialisation is longer for breeds such as Labradors than it is for more reactive breeds such as Collies and German Shepherds (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001). This may go some way to explaining why Labradors tend to be more adaptive and less reactive than other breeds. However, I would still strongly advise against labelling any breed as 'good' or 'bad' with children.

## The importance of adequate socialisation

We need to address the problem from the beginning – breeders need to ensure

that their puppies are well socialised with children during the sensitive period of socialisation (**Figure 1**). The most crucial period of socialisation is still up for debate, but most researchers agree it is between 2 and 16 weeks of age (The Kennel Club, 2014). Most of this time will the puppy will be in the breeders' hands so it is important to advise any clients considering getting a puppy that they ask the breeder whether the dog will have been exposed to children regularly. Choosing the puppy that runs over to your children is probably a safer bet than the scared, but cute looking puppy that is cowering in a corner.

If you provide well-run puppy socialisation classes at your clinic, it is



**Figure 1.** Puppies should be regularly socialised, between 2 and 16 weeks of age, including with children

useful to invite well-behaved children to the classes, and to talk about the subject of children and dogs with the owners. It is important to remember that even people who do not have children of their own, may have family or friends with children.

Boys between 5 and 9 years of age are most likely to be bitten (NHS, 2012). Offering to provide talks at local schools with children of this age group is not only great for promoting your clinic, but also the perfect time to discuss dog safety with young children themselves.

This said, it is also important that we do not frighten people into believing that children and dogs are a hazardous combination, and that dog bites are inevitable. A common reason for rehoming dogs and cats seems to be a concern for the safety of children. It is important to note that although dog attacks on children are on the increase (HSCIC, 2012), fatal dog attacks in the UK are very rare – between 2007 and 2012 there were 4 fatal dog attacks on children (DEFRA, 2012). There are actually many health and developmental benefits for children that grow up with dogs (**Box 1**).

On the other hand, we must be sympathetic to clients who feel they need to rehome their dog because they are having children. They may have concerns about how the dog will react once the baby is born, or they may worry that they will have the sufficient time (or funds) to look after the dog once the baby arrives.

▣ **Box 1.** Benefits of pet ownership for children (Blue Dog, 2014)

- Dogs encourage higher levels of physical activity.
- Children who live with pets develop a more stable immune system.
- Children who grow up with pets are less likely to develop allergies or asthma.
- Pets help teach compassion, empathy and responsibility.
- It has been shown that children who grow up with pets are often less self-centred and develop better social skills at a young age.

It is important not to judge these people as we may not know the full situation at home, or if these families have enough support available to them. Having a child is a life-changing event that is often coupled with very high stress levels and it is possible that rehoming may be in the best interests of the dog.

## Preparing dogs for the arrival of a new baby

There are some useful points you can make prior to the baby's arrival:

- Ensure that the dog obeys basic commands, such as sit and stay, and will come when called as this makes dealing with babies and dogs far easier for everyone!
- A sound-effect CD with baby noises can be a useful desensitisation tool. It should be played quietly at first so that the dog does not react to the noise, gradually increase the volume over a number of weeks until the dog has become accustomed to the sounds without any reaction.
- Begin introducing boundaries before the baby arrives – get the dog used to any new routines that may arise. It is advisable to keep the dog out of the child's bedroom so install a stair gate if necessary.
- Acclimatise the dog to the baby toys, buggy and other baby equipment well in advance of baby arriving.
- Scent swapping – ask dad to bring home a muslin square or piece of baby clothing that has the baby's scent on it before mum and baby return home from hospital. This should be repeated 3-4 times if possible.
- Make sure the dog is up-to-date with all vaccinations and parasite control. Also make sure a vet has given it a thorough check over so that any potentially painful conditions (e.g. arthritis, ear infections) are found and treated – a painful dog will be much more likely to become aggressive or have lower tolerance of children.

Once the baby has arrived:

- Ensure that the dog always has its own space, and freedom to move away from the child at all times. Do not force a dog to interact with a child.
- Make sure the dog gets plenty of exercise; having a good 'off-road'

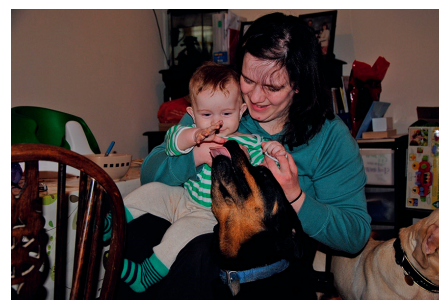
buggy, sling or child carrier makes this much easier. (**Fig 2**) Advise the owner to hire a nanny for the child or dog walker for the dog if the owner feels they cannot manage them together. Grandmothers and fathers can often fulfil a very useful role in this respect!

- Teach children respect and boundaries – do not allow them to chase, taunt or pull at the dog.
- Utilise baby gates to give the dogs their own child-free space without making them feel shut away from the family environment.
- The most vital rule with dogs and children is that they are *never* left unsupervised (**Fig 3**).

Remind owners that dogs should not be expected to put up with everything a child can throw at them. I had one owner ask me how I could stop the dog growling at the children when they pull the dogs ears. I had to explain diplomatically to



▣ **Figure 2.** Having dogs and children together can be a very rewarding experience



▣ **Figure 3.** All interactions between children and dogs must be closely supervised

the client that the dog was well within his rights to growl, and that actually it was more a case of teaching the children to respect the dog. Dogs need boundaries, but so do children.

Advise owners always to treat dogs the way they expect their child to treat them – lead by example. Do not shout at the dog or punish them physically. Ensure the child is not allowed in the dog bed. This should be a dog's sacred ground, where it knows it will be left in peace.

Children must not be allowed to chase or taunt dogs. Be aware of dog toys or treats that the child may try to take from them. This is a recipe for disaster, and often dogs are punished by owners for simply protecting their favourite things. I tend to wait until my son is napping or has gone to bed before I offer my dogs a well-deserved chew toy or treat.

Over-exuberant play with dogs should be discouraged. I had to assist in euthanasing a beloved family pet who

had badly injured a teenage daughter during play. The owners told me that they had always played that way for years, and that there had never been a problem. Unfortunately we may never know what triggered the attack, but during heightened arousal we must remember that dogs have natural instincts that can easily cause predatory or defensive behaviours; we must also remember that it is not just young babies that are potentially at risk.

As veterinary professionals we must be a source of helpful and supportive information to parents or soon-to-be-parents. We must also lead the way in promoting safe relationships between dogs and children.

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