Puppies and Children

Having a puppy around children can be a great way to socialize them, however, it can be particularly challenging for a family of a new puppy that has young children. Children have difficulty asserting themselves over puppies because there is less understanding on the child’s part (also they are smaller and generally less assertive with their voice tone). Children generally tend to excite puppies more than what an adult would because they are more energetic (and often like to stir up the puppy) so it’s very important that children, young children and toddlers should always be supervised around the puppy.

It is very important that not only is the puppy taught to behave around children, but the children are taught to have to behave around puppies. Children need to avoid rough play and excitable behaviour (easier said than done!) If the puppy jumps up on the children then the children should be taught to walk away and ignore the excitable behaviour. It’s very important when you or a child ignores the puppy – that it means no eye contact and no physical contact, & in addition to this no verbal contact.

The child should ignore the puppy until it settles down or they can remove themselves from the room by stepping over a barrier or going through a door that will prevent the puppy from following and chasing. If this cannot be done then the puppy needs to be kept on a lead when being supervise by the adult.

The first few months will be particularly challenging, but it’s definitely worth the hard work.

If the puppy and child cannot be supervised together then I suggest that the puppy is kept either outdoors or within a play pen area, if it’s easier to manage then the puppy should be on the lead. Most children have the ability to reason (and therefore you can explain to them why they shouldn’t get excitable) however, a puppy will never learn to reason.

Getting the children involved in the training and feeding of the puppy will be very beneficial to both the child and also the puppy. This helps the children to feel responsible and also to makes them to realize what an important job they are helping with. When it comes to feeding time the children can help prepare the food and help feeding, and with the parents supervision getting the puppy to sit and wait for its food. When the puppy is eating the adult can throw a treat nearby to the puppy’s food bowl. If the puppy seems quite relaxed with this then children can also throw treats down around the food bowl (then gradually place treats near and in the food bowl). The puppy needs to be aware that the child is not a threat around the food bowl but keep in mind this must always be done under supervision. If the puppy is very relaxed with people around the food bowl then this can be increased to placing food at the edge of the food bowl just on the outside on the ground, care must be taken to ensure that your puppy is relaxed and hasn’t stiffened up because your child will be placed in a vulnerable situation by bending down to a food bowl. For more information see our handout on food bowl training.

If there are any problems with your puppy growling or showing behaviour such as standing stiff over their food bowl when they eat then you must seek help from a behaviourist or veterinary behaviourist.

Training

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A Puppy should be trained to accept handling all over its body and this can be done through massage, handling, and through brushing or grooming your puppy. Children can also be involved with gentle brushing techniques and handling as well, and the puppy should always be praised for staying calm and being well-behaved.

Typical things that other children may do: grabbing the puppy by the collar or the ears or the tail, It’s important that parents can handle the puppy in ways like this just to gauge the puppies response and to get the puppy used to this in a very gentle but relaxed way. The puppy should be praised and rewarded for accepting handling like this.

It’s important to remember that the puppies behaviour, both to a child and an adult it’s always going to be better when the puppy is allowed indoors as well as outdoors, if the puppy only ever lives outdoors it will be twice as excitable when children go outdoors and may also should be particularly bossy or territorial within their yard. So from the young age it is important to bring the puppy indoors on a lead and teach him/her to be calm indoors; to share the indoor space with the family as well rather than spending 100 percent of the time outdoors.

The more contact you have with your puppy the more incidental training can be done, if the puppy is indoors as well as outdoors both you and other family members have more contact with the puppy. Teach the puppy how to behave rather than just leave them outside (where they tend to get twice as excitable with the interaction when the family comes out to see them).

Keep in mind the following situations are situations which you need to take more caution for your puppy and for the children.

- If there are dogs playing together down at the park or a dog comes to visit then you need to take more caution when your children are around.

- If the dog is unwell or in pain or may just be nervous or excited, pay extra attention to their behaviour and the interactions that the child has with the puppy.

- If there’s food around (either the puppy’s food or human food) you need to take more caution.

- If visiting children are around the puppy you need to make sure that the puppy is safe from children accidently (or purposely) hurting the puppy, but also you need to make sure the children are safe from those sharp puppy teeth.

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