

# **Toddlers and Dogs**

**By Michelle Posage, DVM**



Humorist, Robert Benchley, once said “Dachshunds are ideal dogs for small children, as they are already stretched and pulled to such a length that the child cannot do much harm one way or the other.”

It is true a dog may be man's best friend, but the toddler is a dog's worse enemy.

Indeed, my training as a veterinarian and animal behaviorist has not completely saved my two Boxer dogs from the aggravation of my 2-year-old son. I am living through the terrible two's and so must my dogs. We have to endure the tantrums and mood swings together. However, I have established some rules and routines to make it easier.

First, human family members have their beds and the dogs have theirs. We do not share. My son is learning how to respect the space of others and the dogs know they have a safe, toddler-free area to go to if they need it. There are no territorial disputes over the best spot on the couch, and we throw a pillow on the floor when we feel like cuddling with the dogs.

Again, the dogs have their food and we have ours. We expect to eat our food without harassment and we give the same respect to the dogs. To make enforcement easier, the dogs are fed meals rather than having food in the bowls all day. The dogs stay in their beds while we eat our meals. As a reward, they are allowed to graze from the floor when we are done. This has the added benefit of saving me from hauling out the vacuum cleaner after every meal.

Our family also has rules on physical contact. People don't hit, kick, tug, step on, crash into, or pinch the dogs; and in turn, they don't bite us. As it happens, the dogs are better at keeping their end of the bargain (which is gratefully appreciated).

Out of frustration or as a plea for attention, my son will sometimes “kick the dog”. My first reaction is always horror. No dog should have to endure that sort of treatment, but the trick is to convey disapproval to my son while rewarding the dogs for tolerance. Yelling “NO” only makes the dogs more anxious, so I have learned to call my dogs to me and reward them for getting out the line of fire.

Of course, my son and I talk about what the dogs do like. The white Boxer has a large brown patch of fur on her back and we make a game out of scratching the spot. I also praise him when he pets the dogs gently or runs around them rather than into them.

Like mine, most dogs will tolerate a hug that is given a little too enthusiastically or a ball thrown *at* them instead of *for* them. There is much to be said about a species that will submit to the offspring of another. But sadly, some dogs and children just do not mix. When the annoying and unpredictable behavior of a toddler is met with progressively aggressive behavior from the dog and when a growl has no effect, a bite may follow.

Most clients that I see for this problem obtained their dogs before their children. In fact, the dog was the essentially the “baby” of the family before the real thing arrived. The transition for a dog in this situation can be difficult if not properly prepared. The dogs I work with usually would have done better if they were sufficiently socialized at an early age and properly trained.

For parents of young children who do not already own a dog, I suggest waiting until the children are older before getting a pet and then choosing wisely. The risks and responsibilities of owning a dog and parenting a toddler probably overshadow the benefits. But of course, Robert Benchley also said, “A boy can learn a lot from a dog: obedience, loyalty, and the importance of turning around three times before lying down.”

*Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to [www.amcne.com](http://www.amcne.com).*