

Safety First: A Primer for Parents, Kids and Dogs

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Kelley Filson teaches children how to interact properly, so they grow confident and comfortable in the company of dogs. Filson, education program manager for the San Francisco chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, has an underlying theme in all her instruction: safety first. "Even if accidents are rare, I explain that whenever you get in a car, you always wear a seatbelt," she says. If you use the same amount of practiced caution with dogs, you and your child become pooch enthusiasts.

Here are Filson's **tips for parents on helping children develop proper petiquette:**

Never pet a dog when a person is not holding the leash. You can't ask a dog, "Are you friendly?" You can always ask the owner.

Before letting a dog sniff your hands (palm down or in a fist), stand at a distance and say, "Come here." Let the dog make the first move.

Never run up to a dog; instead, let a dog approach you. Especially helpful for young children: When a dog comes up to you, freeze like a tree trunk, which is a way of giving the dog permission to investigate you.

Don't permit your child to crawl up to a dog, which could startle it. The child should walk. Also, keep your distance until the dog is ready to come to you. Never allow your child to bark at a dog or hug a dog, which translates to the dog as, "I can't get away."

Never take anything from a dog, especially a toy or food. If you're playing fetch, let the dog spit the ball or toy out before you pick it up to throw.

Teach kids how to read basic dog body language: Tail underneath and ears tucked means a dog is scared; showing teeth and growling says, "Leave me alone."

If you're with a young child and are anxious about an approaching dog, resist the impulse to pick up the child. To a dog, that's a big, scary and potentially threatening movement. Instead, adults should become like a tree with the child – or if feeling truly threatened – curl up like a log over the child.

Don't assume that puppies are less a threat than grown-up dogs. Quite the contrary. Puppies are still learning the rules and, like small children aren't able to control their instincts.

Seek out positive experiences between your child and a dog. Go to a place with dogs on leashes where you know the dogs are friendly and owners on their best behavior.

Also essential: petiquette for dog owners:

Consider it your responsibility to teach people not to approach dogs without asking.

Do your part to make sure children have positive experiences with your dog. That's the only way people will learn to enjoy being around dogs.

Keep your off-leash dog under proper voice control (and, of course, always clean up after your pet). There's no excuse, ever, for an out-of-control puppy or grown-up dog. If you see your off-leash dog running toward someone, the proper response is to yell, "Rover, come," not, "Don't worry! My dog's friendly."

Because most dog bites occur in homes, parents with dogs should have dogs neutered or spayed. If you have a dog and are expecting a child, you should have a trainer come to your home to help the dog adjust.

If you have a child and are getting a dog, the dog should love children – not just tolerate them, but love them.

If your child is going to a friend's house, find out if the family has animals. Ask that the parent introduce your child to their dog.

A polite word of thanks goes a long way: "Thank you for asking to pet my dog." "Thank you for keeping your dog on a leash."

Children should know never to go somewhere with a stranger and a dog. "Lost" dogs are often used as bait by people claiming to be looking for a stray pet.