

The Safe Kids/Safe Dogs Project Presents:

A Dog for the Kids



Quick tips to help you determine if this is the right time

By Karen Peak

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Introduction



Hollywood gives families unrealistic impressions of the relationship between a child and a dog. That loyal Collie saving a child from a well, a pair of hounds dying protecting their boy from wild boars, a loyal cur sacrificing everything to protect a boy from a rabid animal and even the rampaging Saint Bernard trapping a panicking mother and child in their cars all have something in common: these dogs are highly trained animals performing alongside actors. Off screen are directors, a whole crew and the handler giving the dog carefully trained cues.

Hollywood has done more to harm the domestic dog than any acceptance into any registry. You see a dog on TV or in a movie and you have to get one. This leads to irresponsible breeding in response to impulsive buyers. Hollywood has given unrealistic expectations to humans. This booklet is designed to get you thinking about if this the best time to introduce a dog into your family.

This was written in response to too many cases I have had where parents brought in a dog to “complete” the ideal family image and those who gave into the begging of children and found themselves in deep dog fur.

A Dog for the Kids is just simply a few things from my years of experience as a parent, competitor in various dog events, time with rescues and being involved with various dog clubs and breeders, I feel parents must consider. **From here, it is hoped you will progress to more research and make the best choice for your situation.** At the end, I recommend a few authors to help you better decide if adding a dog to your family at this point is in the best interest of every one.

As I finalize this, I recently consulted with a family. Mom bought a puppy that she was told would be perfect with her children (one in diapers and two under age 5). Two people in the house had known dog allergies. Within a week, Mom had returned the puppy instead of working things out. She was already overwhelmed. There were reactions to the supposedly hypoallergenic puppy. I sent Mom information on how to make a house with children and a puppy work, games to play and was more than willing to help them. I could do nothing about allergies. Mom fell for the Hollywood dog and child image and the myth that there are hypoallergenic dogs. This family illustrated just why I put this booklet together.

My children have asked for a dog. What is the best type of dog for a home with children?



There is no perfect breed or crossbred dog for a home with children. Some rescues and breeders will insist that certain

types of dogs are better and this is valid to a point. Labrador Retrievers are highly recommended and can be great dogs in the proper home. What if the energy level may be more than you want to handle? Then a Lab is a poor choice. Some breeds and crosses of dogs may have lower tolerance levels or be subtle with their body language. These dogs may not be the best consideration for a home with children. Hunter (above) was too much for his first family. He was a cross of two breeds that can be great family dogs – in the right situation. By the time Hunter was grown, he was surrendered to a local shelter, picked up by a rescue group and ended up with my husband and me (before we had children). With crossbreds, it can be difficult to determine adult temperament whereas purebreds from a good source have a standard for temperament for which serious breeders strive. Hunter was excessively active, very strong, had his own agenda with life and driven. He fell more in line behaviorally with the herding breed part than with the calmer, more laid back other half. With work, Hunter rehabilitated and became a good companion for my children.

Think about size. Larger dogs are stronger and may be able to better withstand a jostle from a child (as long as the dog was taught tolerance to being bumped). Alternatively, larger dogs can easily bump a child over if the dog lacks proper training. I worked with a dog, well over 100 pounds at barely a year old who was the victim of an eight year old boy and permitted wrestling games – cute when the dog was 8 weeks old, dangerous now. The size of the dog was what increased the risk. He outweighed the boy and all the boy's friends. People were being injured as the dog played. Not the dog's fault, he was responding to what he was taught: grabbing and pulling people down is good play.

Small dogs are often chosen for children simply because the dogs are considered easier to manage. Some children are very gentle and quickly learn how to interact with small dogs. A quiet, calm child with proper lessons may do fine with a small dog: however, rambunctious children may not be a suitable match for any dog until the children learn dog safety and the parents are willing to keep up with the work. Children love to pick up small dogs and treat the dogs like toys. A drop can result in serious injury to the dog. A dog not wishing to be picked up may learn that biting is the only way to stop a child. The dog in the picture above was a poor dear I held for a few days until I could transport her to a rescue able to take her in. The poor baby was “not the perfect dog” for her owner (a client of mine), and the young dog had some bad experiences with children. The owner decided to sign her over to me so the dog could be transported to a rescue a couple hundred miles away. For the days we had this dog, my daughter, about four at the time, spent many hours quietly teaching the dog that children are



not bad. Her former buddy at her first home was not so lucky. That poor pup suffered two severely shattered legs after being dropped by a rough child.

Once you have looked at various breeds, considered your needs and weighed them against the needs of different dogs, now you need to be willing to make the time commitment to training both children and dog. **No matter how well chosen your dog is and how good the source, if your child is**

behaving in ways that stress, threaten, challenge, or tease a dog, that dog could develop issues.

Remember, a dog will react to his environment. There is no magic pill or surgery that will stop undesired behaviors. No matter what you will be told; there is no such thing as a non-biting dog. Therefore, my questions to you are: how much work are you willing to do to find the best canine match? How much work are you willing to put into your child/children to help create a harmonious relationship? Even the most tolerant dog can be pushed into a bite. **The best dog for a family with children is carefully chosen, from a caring source, entering a family that is fully prepared to meet the needs of the dog and with adults willing to work to create a harmonious child-dog relationship.**

Should I get a puppy or an adult dog?

At some point a child may clamor for a puppy. Puppies from a good source will have a solid foundation through careful breeding and socializing begun by the breeder. Even a rescued litter can get a solid start by the rescuer and the work can be done in a shelter setting if the staff is motivated. The more puppies are exposed to by the person placing the litter; the better prepared the puppies will be for their new homes. **However, the work MUST be continued by the new owner.** Puppies are bigger time commitments if you want to start out on the right paw and prevent many avoidable issues causing owners to give up adolescent dogs. A few this you have to consider:

- A puppy should meet ten to twenty new people a week for the first two months with you and visit five new places a week.
- A puppy needs to have many positive experiences when young as well as learn manners in different areas.
- A puppy needs early, formal lessons and socializing.
- A puppy needs to have more time with you in order to properly learn house manners and rules.
- Children need training or else how the child interacts can teach the puppy undesirable behaviors.



Remember, dogs are different species with a different set of behavioral norms that are different from those of humans. We need to teach a different species to live in our lives.

Take a look at the ages of your children, then amount of free time you have and ask yourself: “Am I able and willing to make changes to add in the needs of a puppy while maintaining the care of my children, spouse and self?” If in doubt, talk to a good trainer who, ideally, is also a parent for advice. A good trainer will be able to teach you what your family should know to help you start off right with a pup!

Adult dogs have longer attention spans, better bladder control and have reached full growth. There are no shocks when that little puppy matures to be 100 or more pounds because the rescue misjudged the lineage or the “breeder” of that cute cross litter neglected to tell you that though Mom is not big, that Dad was a 150 pound mastiff cross.

When considering an adult dog, watch how the dog reacts with your children. **Do not go view the dog without all your children.** Look for green lights and red flags including:

- Does the dog walk calmly up, appear relaxed, tail wagging happily, gives happy sniffs and generally seems to welcome your children? These are indicators the dog may be comfortable with the presence of your children.



- Does the dog back away, are the ears pinned, tail tucked, whites of eyes showing? All these are indicators the dog is not comfortable with children nearby.

- Does the dog come in like gang-busters, barking and wriggling madly, jumping and lunging excitedly like a kid in a candy store? The dog may be very happy with your children but he needs to learn self-control.

Adult dogs with some training and that have had positive experiences with children can be less work than a young puppy. You need to ask questions, observe the dog and choose with your head. You may be given a very sad story but if you are questioning things you see, reconsider the dog.

If you are not sure about an adult dog, as with a puppy, talk to a trainer. See if the trainer will visit the dog with your family. The trainer may see things you are missing and be able to help your family learn to work a dog through any habits he may have.

With both an adult and a puppy, choose a trainer who emphasizes gentle methods based on trust building and not physical punishment or proving to a dog who is in charge. Yes, the house is yours and you determine the rules, but trust is not built through intimidation and even pain.



What is the best age child for a dog?

My personal preference for the average family is to wait until the child is out of diapers and not as “needy” as an infant or younger toddler. During this time, cultivate gentle hands and calm behaviors. Though parents dream of that relationship growing from an infant with a darling puppy to a child and his beloved dog, the reality is different.

A baby and puppy are a lot of work alone, combine the two and it can be overwhelming for the parent(s). If you work full time, it will be even more work. Diapers, teething, colic, potty training, house training, leash work, chewing, finding a preschool, socializing the puppy, dealing with grabbing fingers and tugging mouths and all the things that Hollywood does not show or shows in a humorous light can be exhausting for many parents. Older children are able to help with feeding, cleaning up after and even training your dog. However, how does that child interact with dogs? Is the child quieter, behaved and caring or wild and screaming? Children have to learn how to behave around dogs just as dogs have to learn how to tolerate the antics of a child. I have had well-trained dogs and then had a child. I have had a toddler and brought in a puppy. I had an older child and older toddler and brought in puppies (puppies were about six months apart). I have lived this and speak from experience.

It is amazing how many dogs are given up because the owners had a child and the dog was not prepared for the addition or the couple had a young child, bought a puppy and were unable to give the pup the needed time. Now the combination of toddler and excitable adolescent dog is too much for the parents. **You never see an ad offering a child for sale because the parents are overwhelmed and decided to keep the dog.**

Now that I have decided to get a dog, where should I look?

There are two main places you should look: a carefully chosen breeder or a carefully chosen rescue group. **A good breeder and rescue group will be constantly evaluating and trying to determine what environment will be the best for the puppy or dog.** Take a look around:

- Are the puppies/dogs raised in the house or in a kennel? Do they get house time if they are kenneled?
- Where in the house are the puppies/dogs? Are they in the middle of everything or tucked into a back room? Are there signs of different surfaces for them to walk on and learn to potty on? Are there toys and things that make noise for them to get used to hearing?
- How do the puppies and dam or the dog you are interested in appear and behave? Do they want to meet you or do they back off? Does the breeder make excuses for why things were not done or explain what was done and give you ideas on how to continue on the road to hopeful success?
- Does the breeder or rescuer allow you to see other dogs in the home and interact with them?
- Does the breeder or rescuer explain why they feel a certain animal may be a better match?
- Are things clean, do the animals look healthy and up to date on vaccines?
- Did the breeder breed the litter? Is the rescue a legitimate, non-profit, 501c3 rescue? If not, you may be dealing with a broker or reseller.



Should you decide to go to a shelter, you should learn how to read different body language in order to help determine what dog may be a good choice. You may feel badly for a specific dog, but if it is not a good match, what could happen? If you are concerned about your ability to read a dog in a shelter situation, see if you can get a local trainer to come along. A shelter cage is not the easiest place to evaluate a dog.

Ask to take the dog for a walk to a quieter place. See how the dog behaves. Red flags should never be ignored. Not all behavioral issues will be visible from behind a cage door. That quiet dog may be stressed and shut down as opposed to truly calm. That wildly barking dog may really be a sweetie who is just excited. Shelter staff may not be up on behavioral issues, reading body language and often have to go only by what the surrendering person states. People surrendering dogs may lie in order to try and make the dog more appealing. Shelter staff rely a lot on surrender information.

- Does the dog look happily about; tail wagging happily, face and eyes looking relaxed? Does the dog seem to take right to your children and enjoy their attentions? Is the dog responding happily to your voice?
- Does the dog have ears and tail tucked, looking around nervously, avoiding gazes, trying to escape in panic? Does the dog go on instant alert, ears pitched forward, eyes narrowing or wide, tail straight out or slowly clocking back and forth? Is the dog up on toes, hackles raised? Does the dog seem uneasy and confused with your children about? Does the staff have to use a prong collar to control the dog?

Be wary if the staff tries to guilt trip you into a specific dog or insists that a cross bred puppy with one parent that is larger than you want will stay small. Be wary if the staff will not allow you to take a dog out and away from the cage. Be wary if they do not allow you to review all



documents and evaluations before adopting.

Ask why the dog was given up and were any behavioral evaluations done.

Shelter dogs can be a great choice, however, do your homework.

Where should I not look?



You should avoid pet shops and flea markets, etc. **You have no idea of the source, what health testing was done on the parents and socializing is minimal from the source to sale.** It is not uncommon for puppies to even be imported from foreign countries for resale at shops and markets. There is also no guarantee or a minimal one

when you go to a pet shop and you may have to have the initial veterinary exam performed by a clinic the store uses. If the dog does not work out, has a health issue that shows up a few years later that is genetic (and rarely is pet shop stock from tested parents, it is just one extra expense), you are stuck.

Online lists may have a variety of dogs of varying types and costs, however, why is the person getting rid of the dog? Is the dog really sweet and great with children or did the dog try to kill little Timmy? Is the dog listed as "No rescue will take?" This could be because the dog has been deemed too much of a risk to attempt to adopt out and would be put down or the rescue refused to take the dog in because the rescue will not euthanize behavioral issues and cannot place a biting dog. There is also a possibility that the "owner" had gotten the dog for free through an online list and is now reselling.



With pet shops and perusing online lists, you have to remember, these employees or owners want to place a dog. **They may tell you things that are not accurate just to make a few hundred dollars or unload a problem they created and cannot or will not fix.** These places are the riskiest places to acquire a family dog. Take your time, research your source well. Do not act in haste or because you have to get a puppy for a birthday or holiday.



What other things should I consider before I get a dog?

Why am I considering a dog? Are you considering a dog because you really want to add one to your life or because you want to quiet children who are wearing you down? If it is to placate your children, think again. You are the adult: you are the

primary caregiver of the dog. You are the one responsible for all expenses and stress. You can teach a lesson about responsibility and timing or you can teach a lesson about immediate gratification, how a parent can be worn down and how life is disposable when you grow out of that no longer cute puppy. It is perfectly fine to tell a child “No.”

Long term and short term commitment: It is easy to go out for a couple half-hour walks a day and say “I can do this!” Now can you do this for the next 10 – 18 years, rain or shine even if you are sick? What about when a child goes to college or moves out? The first dog that came into my life when I was just shy of ten saw me through the purchase of my first house. She was almost 16 when my husband and I lost her. Has she lived to 18, she would have seen the birth of my son.

Expenses: The dog is the cheap part. Remember to factor in every cost from veterinarian bills, emergencies, professional grooming if needed, training, food, supplies, boarding when you travel, etc for the next 10 – 18 years. These expenses exist whether you get a free dog or spend \$2,000.

When children lose interest: Many people get dogs because the children have asked for them. Once the fun wears off, the parents are responsible for the dog. No child should be the sole caregiver for a dog. You are the one who brought the dog into the family; you are responsible for the dog. Go online, go to a shelter the months after the holidays and see how many dogs are the victims of “Child lost interest” which translates to “I refuse to take responsibility for the dog I got for my child.”

When the dog gets old: When the dog is no longer able to keep up with your family: how will you handle the change? Will you adapt or dump? Many senior dogs are given up simply because they are old. A senior dog may have a lessening of abilities, may become quicker to startle because hearing and vision is waning. However, senior dogs and children can do wonderfully together if you take the time to teach your child.



My old Ryker was a senior when I had my children. Ryker was born in 1993. I had Connor in 1998 and Sarah in 2004. He was the only dog I could trust not to wander off if they dropped his leash on walks.

Do you have a special needs child or one with health concerns? Will you have the time and ability to manage both your child and the needs of a dog? A dog can be a great asset for a special needs child; however, do you have the ability and time to make it work? There is no such thing as a hypoallergenic dog. There are various things with a dog you can be allergic too. Even lower and “no shed” breeds are not hypoallergenic.

Do I have other pets? Though this booklet is about children and dogs, if you have other pets, you need to be able to commit not only to adding in a dog to your child, but helping other pets adjust to the new family member. Do your children have caged pets that you will have to teach the dog to ignore? It is sad how many small pets, cats, and even the new dog are given up because the new dog is bothering the existing pets. Over the years I have had guinea pigs, rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, rats, mice, cats, a chinchilla, dogs and of course, my children. The more pets you have, the more work you need to do in order to create harmony.

If you choose a dog carefully, make certain that this is a good time to add a dog, teach your children well and are a dedicated parent, what you can accomplish with a dog and a child is wondrous!

You can have that superb dog/child bond, but you need to work at it. No dog is born automatically being a child's best friend. No dog is born

automatically tolerating yelling, screaming, running, fighting, singing, dancing, being dressed up and so on. Remember, those dogs on TV and in the movies are well trained animal actors taking direction from off stage handlers. Those families are all paid actors in various roles. It is not reality. Reality is careful choice, parental dedication and work.

Now take the next step and visit your local library, check out online resources, and talk to experienced dog people. The more work you do before you bring home a puppy for the children, the better off you will be. Sometimes, the best dog is a stuffed dog.

There are many wonderful authors that I suggest you read before bringing home a dog, a few to get started with:



- Dr Ian Dunbar
- Turid Rugaas
- Dr Patricia McConnell
- Jean Donaldson

You may also check out West Wind Dog Training, www.WestWindDogTraining.com, my dog training site, for more information on preparedness for a dog and how to go about choosing your pet.



“Dogs 101” filming for the episode including Shetland Sheepdogs which aired October 2, 2010