

Can you tell when your dog is fearful, alert, or relaxed? Do you know how to make sure that your dog is safe to take to the dog park, or even more importantly, to a park where children may be playing? If you have children, do you allow them to pet dogs they do not know?

Says Susan Isaacs, founder of The Well-Heeled Dog, "It is more important than ever that owners lay a solid foundation so they can enable their dogs and their kids to be happy, confident, and SAFE.

Here are 7 basic things to start thinking about to keep your dog and your children safe around each other.

1. **Basic dog instincts.** Dogs are hunters by nature and can be aroused to play or chase by small, fast-moving beings with high-pitched voices – in other words, kids! There are visual cues that tell you how a dog is reacting to a given situation. Growling, curling lip, baring teeth, hackles up, stiff legged stance – all these and other signals are how a dogs tells you, "I'm not comfortable. Stay back."
2. **How dogs greet and play vs. how children greet and play.** Dogs rely on their sense of smell and on visual body signals to say "hello" to one another. Dogs use their mouths and teeth in play. They need to be taught to have a "soft mouth" around humans. Children may be tempted to reach out and hug a dog. Dogs don't like being hugged unless they know you well and have become accustomed to such handling.

Especially with children under 10, adults should (1) Accompany them around any dog; (2) Ask the owner if is okay and safe for the child to pet the dog, and where they should pet her; (3) If it is okay with the owner, have the child make a fist and calmly present it to the dog to sniff (4) If the dog and owner are comfortable, allow the child to pet the dog calmly, avoiding jerky movements and squealing.

3. **Safe vs. unsafe games to play with your dog.** Tug-of-war, chasing and wrestling games are clearly unsafe. Safer bets would include find-it, tossing games, or hide and seek.
4. **The importance of training your dog.** We cannot say this enough – *train, train, train your dog*. What is the verbal or visual cue you use to get your dog to settle down, sit, come to you, or "leave it"? Are you consistent? Would you remember to use the cue in an emergency situation?
5. **The importance of socializing your puppy to many dogs, many people and many situations.** Until he reaches approximately four months of age, your puppy is like a sponge, absorbing both positive and negative experiences for life. Familiarize your pup with different sounds, sights and smells so that he learns to take them all in stride. Introduce him to people of different ages, ethnicities, sizes, both male and female; to people with sunglasses, hats, umbrellas. Giving your dog or puppy the proper training in a group setting is a wonderful way for him to see other dogs and people in a safe and controlled environment.



6. **Approaching a dog on leash.** Especially with children under 10, adults should (1) Accompany them around any dog; (2) Ask the owner if is okay and safe for the child to pet the dog, and where they should pet her; (3) If it is okay with the owner, have the child make a fist and present it to the dog to sniff (4) If the dog and owner are comfortable, allow the child to pet the dog calmly, avoiding jerky movements and squealing.

7. **What to do if a loose dog comes up to you in the street.** There's no single way to deal with an unknown dog that approaches you in the street. If a dog is galumphing toward you, tail wagging, tongue hanging out, he probably just wants to play. You could simply remain calm and walk the other way if you do not want to interact with him. If the dog is charging at you, remain as calm as you can, stand very still and look away. Or curl up into a ball on the ground, protecting your neck with your hands. Your best hope is that the dog will lose interest and walk away. Then you can calmly walk in the other direction. However, you can never be absolutely sure of how a strange dog will behave, which is why people sometimes get bitten despite taking precautions.

