



A knowledge of dog body language and appropriate interactions is key for both adults and children. Here are some recommendations for promoting positive dog-child interactions and safety management.

Signs of Stress

Understanding animal body language means knowing what to watch for. Interactions between children and dogs should be monitored by an adult at all times.

Research shows that children have difficulty identifying signs of stress in dogs. Therefore, they may not recognize when a dog is fearful, which can escalate to aggression or a bite. Remember, body language is a dog's **ONLY** way of communicating their discomfort in a situation.

Signs of stress in dogs:

- Lip licking
- Tight or closed mouth
- Yawning (when not tired)
- Pacing, unable to settle
- Whining or growling
- Flattened ears
- Whale eye (whites of the eyes are visible)
- Lifting a front paw
- Avoiding physical contact or turning away
- Stiff or lowered posture
- Tucked tail

Children, especially younger children or toddlers, can have unpredictable, fast movements, and high vocalizations. Not just stressful for parents but also distressing or overwhelming for some dogs. If dogs are not positively socialized with children as a puppy, or they have had a previous negative experience with a child, they may also become fearful around children.

Never assume that a dog is OK to interact with – always pay attention to the dog's body language and error on the side of caution, especially if the dog is unfamiliar.

Management

Here are a few strategies that can help reduce stress for your dog and improve child safety:

- Be mindful of how you and your children touch the dog. Typically avoid petting dogs on their paws, ears, face, or tail. Also avoid hugging, squeezing, or kissing dogs – they don't enjoy

this! Giving dogs gentle pets or scratches on their back or side, for a few seconds at a time is much more enjoyable and less unnatural for the animal.

- Ensure your dog has a quiet space to rest uninterrupted. This could be their kennel, a dog bed, or other comfortable space that is away from where children or busy activities are in the home. Children should be advised to not disturb or interact with a dog when they are resting or sleeping.
 - Monitor all interactions between children and canines. If you see signs of fear, anxiety, stress or subtle aggression, separate your dog and children immediately.
 - Consider baby gates to establish a physical boundary between your children and dog. This can help prevent an aggressive encounter.
 - Remove objects in the home that your dog may guard from your children. For example, if your dog guards their toys from household members, ensure their toys are in areas that only your dog can access, but not your children.
 - Advise children never to disturb your dog while they are eating. Feed your dog in a quiet area that is away from household activity. This helps prevent them from guarding food. Alternatively, you can also use your dog's kibble as positive reinforcement during training, instead of meal feeding!
 - Try using a calming pheromone diffuser, such as Adaptil® in your household, which can help promote relaxation in dogs. Playing classical or calm music in your household can also help.
- NOTE: Adaptil® is available for purchase at [Bingo's Pet Shop](#).

Positive Interactions

It is recommended that children do not interact with unfamiliar dogs. Even if someone tells you their dog is OK to be petted or socialized with, this may not guarantee a positive interaction. Always pay attention to the dog's body language and avoid approaching a dog who is showing signs of stress.

Never approach a dog who is unattended and/or tethered. Always ensure the dog's guardian is present before considering an interaction.

If approaching or interacting with a dog consider the following steps:

1. Slowly approach the dog at a relaxed walk.
2. Ask the guardian if you can pet their dog.
3. Approach and face the dog sideways – this is the least threatening position. Avoid direct eye contact.
4. Let the dog approach you at their own pace. Do not extend out your hand for the dog to sniff.
 - a. If the dog does not approach you or turns away from you, do not approach or pet the dog – even if their guardian says it's OK.

- b. If the dog is relaxed and showing positive behaviours (e.g. soliciting your attention, sitting or standing or rubbing up against you, tail is wagging, etc.), pet the dog gently on their back or side. Speak calmly and in a positive tone.
5. Stop petting every few seconds. Re-evaluate the dog's behaviour. Do you they continue to solicit your attention or are they avoiding contact? Continue to pet the dog for a few more seconds or stop, depending on the dog's behaviour. This is also referred to as "consent test."

Keep in mind that many dogs might just prefer being around people, rather than being petted or touched. Some dogs also have [reactivity issues](#) with unfamiliar people, so keeping your distance, monitoring body language and avoiding approaching unknown dogs are great ways to keep both dogs and children safe.

Don't Delay

If you have concerns about your dog's behaviour and children, don't delay seeking help from a veterinarian or certified dog trainer who uses reward-based training.

They can help you develop management strategies or a behaviour modification program to promote positive interactions between your dog and children. In some cases, aggression may indicate an underlying health condition or pain, so a veterinarian can help outrule a physical problem if your dog is displaying aggression.

Additional Resources:

CattleDog Publishing – Kids and Dogs: How Kids Should and Should Not Interact With Dogs
<https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kids-and-dogs-how-kids-should-and-should-not-interact-with-dogs/>

Best Friends Society – Dog Safety: Staying Safe Around Dogs
<https://resources.bestfriends.org/article/dog-safety-staying-safe-around-dogs>

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations with our trainers. For further information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-wedo/education-training/dog-training/private-consultations/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).