



What to Do When Your Child is Afraid of Dogs

Whenever Laura sees a dog, she shrieks and clings to her mother's leg. Thomas runs the other way. And Samuel just freezes, wide eyed in terror.

Each of these children is afraid of dogs. As parents, we strive to teach our kids how to cope with life and its challenges. Yet some parents mistakenly believe that it is good for a child to be afraid of dogs because then the child will be more cautious around them.

It doesn't usually work that way. When children are frightened, they often run, scream and flail. These actions typically bring a dog closer, not keep it away.

Dogs can and do bite children on occasion. But it is not as common as you might think, and there are many things you can do to help ensure that your child will not be bitten. The most important is to learn about dog body language and behavior.

The more you know about something, the less scary it becomes. Many kids are frightened because they don't know what a dog will do next. Dogs communicate almost entirely through body language. A basic knowledge of body language can help kids to understand a dog's intentions.

My favorite resource for teaching kids about canine body language is the Doggone Crazy board game (www.doggonecrazy.com). The game includes over 100 playing cards. Each features a color photo of a dog on the front and asks whether it would be safe to approach the dog. The back of each card gives the correct answer and explains why. I especially like that there are a variety of dogs and that each is called by name. I have found that kids are less afraid when they know the dog's name; "Teddy" and "Riley" seem less intimidating than "that collie" or "the wheaten terrier."

After you have a basic understanding of body language, start watching dogs from a distance. Park outside a pet supply store and talk about the dogs you see coming and going. Which ones look happy, which look frightened, which have been taught to walk nicely on a lead, which seem like old or young dogs?

When your child is very comfortable watching dogs at a distance, try introducing older, calm dogs to your child. Respect her fear and work at her own pace. Don't try to rush or cajole her into doing more than she's comfortable with.

Most children will reach out and touch a calm dog's haunches if the owner turns the dog's head away from the child. That's an excellent first step. Talk with your child about how the dog's fur feels. Ask her if she thinks other dogs' fur would be softer or more rough. Get her thinking about that one dog as an individual. Ask the owner to talk about some of the dog's favorite activities.

Work toward having your child give the dog cues (with dog's owner ensuring that the dog complies). Seeing a dog respond correctly to what she asks will help her feel safer.



It's best for her to work steadily with one dog until she feels very comfortable before adding another. Once she has met and likes three calm, adult dogs, begin thinking about introducing her to a puppy. Puppies are bouncy and outgoing, which can be unnerving for a tentative child.

Again, let her start out at a distance, simply observing the puppy's behavior. Talk with her about the ways in which the puppy is similar to and different from the adult dogs she's met. When she is ready, let her approach the puppy. Be sure that adults are there to prevent the puppy from jumping on her; that would set your progress back considerably. Give her treats that she can toss away from herself for the puppy to eat.

If she's comfortable, teach her how to lure the puppy into a sit. First, show her how holding a treat in your hand and moving it just barely higher than the puppy's nose in the direction of his tail will cause the puppy to lift his head up and put his haunches down. Do it a few times so she can watch you. Then have her put a treat in her fist and wrap your hand around hers and lure the puppy into a sit. (Still have an adult there to prevent jumping.)

Take it slow. It's much better to teach your child to be a skilled observer of animal behavior than it is for her to be thrown into situations that frighten her. With patience and time, she will learn that there are many gentle, social dogs, and she'll be able to interact safely and calmly with new dogs she meets. That's far, far safer than having her remain afraid of all dogs.