

Three Steps for Meeting a Dog: Instructions for Parents

It is very important to teach kids how to interact with dogs they are interested in. Childish excitement could be interpreted as a threat by inexperienced dogs.

Good kids and good dogs will have miscommunications every day. By teaching children and dogs how to interact with one another, we laying the groundwork for happy, healthy relationships between them. Take time to help your child practice meeting a variety of dogs.

Step 1: Ask the Owner.

Teach your kids never to rush up toward a dog. Tell them to stop about 5 feet away and ask the owner, "May I pet your dog?"

Sometimes the answer will be no. Many dogs don't live with kids and are not comfortable with them. So if the dog's owner says no, that's okay. Remind your kids that there are lots of other dogs who would love to be petted by them.

If the owner says yes, then the children must ask the dog.



Step 2: Ask the Dog—Do Not Skip This Step!



Tell kids that dogs don't use words but instead rely on body language. Pantomime various emotions such as anger, fear and excitement to show the kids that they use body language too.

Have your children make a fist with the palm pointed down. Then they can slowly extend their arm for the dog to sniff their hand. Teaching the kids to curl their fingers in minimizes the risk of a dog nipping their finger.

When the dog is being given the opportunity to sniff, watch his body language.

Does he come forward with loose, waggy motions? That's definitely a yes.

Does he lean forward for a quick sniff and seem comfortable? Also a yes.

Does he turn his face away from your child's hand? Back away? Bark? Move behind the owner? Look anxious and unsettled? Growl? These are all nos.

Unfortunately some owners don't understand or respect their dog's decision and will drag the dog forward saying, "Oh, he's fine. He loves kids. You can pet him." DON'T! **Do not ever allow your children to pet a dog that does not approach them willingly.**

Step 3: Pet the Dog.

If the owner says yes and the dog says yes, the kids can pet the dog. Tell your kids that they need to be careful of a dog's sensitive eyes and ears. Most dogs don't like to be petted on top of their heads, but nearly all people pet dogs this way—it's a hardwired human behavior. There is a blind spot on top of a dog's head. If he sees your child's hand moving toward that area, the natural inclination is for him to tilt his head up and watch where the hand is going. Now your child's hand is reaching right over the dog's teeth—not a very good place for that hand to be.



Suggest that your children stroke the side of the dog's neck, rub under his chin, scratch his chest, or pet along his back. Most dogs prefer slow, gentle strokes to rapid pat-pat-patting.