



# Paw Prints

**Jodi Schneider McNamee**  
Columnist

## Introducing dogs and children

Some of us have a fairytale image of a child and his dog. Think of Lassie and Timmy, Dorothy and Toto, or even Snoopy and Charlie Brown.

You may have memories of your own cherished pet. But are children and dogs a perfect match? It depends.

Dogs can be a source of unconditional love and a wonderful companion for your kids, and a dog can help teach responsibility, empathy, foster self-esteem and promote physical activity.

As of 2010, over 45 percent of households in the United States owned at least one dog, making canines the most popular family pet in the country. Children are naturally drawn to dogs, and many dogs seem to genuinely enjoy interacting with kids.

Dogs also require a lot of work. And some breeds are more suited to families with children than others. When choosing the right dog for your family, you need to think about the dog's size and temperament, as well as your family's lifestyle and allergy concerns.

Some experts recommend waiting until a child is five (or school age) before bringing a dog into the family.

And don't assume that your child or children will do the work your new furry

friend will require. This responsibility will ultimately fall to you. Discuss the responsibilities of being a pet parent with your kids. Make sure your child understands the basic care a pet requires. You will want to discuss feeding and grooming as well as cleaning up after Rover. You will also need to select a dog that will fit into your family's energy level and living space. In other words, if you are an active, outdoor-oriented family who enjoys running and exercising, a high-energy breed would be best for you. If your family lives a quieter sedentary lifestyle, consider a breed that doesn't require several walks a day.

Bringing young children and young dogs together can lead to problems. Both need a lot of care and patience, and puppies are prone to playful nipping and scratching and may not be used to children. By school age, children learn empathy, but they still may have trouble interpreting a dog's body language. So, they may not recognize that a dog's growl or stiffened posture means "back off."

When visiting the adoption agency, bring your kids with you. You will be able to see whether the child's and the dogs' personalities are a good match. There are many wonderful shelter dogs looking for a good home. Canine rescue organizations go out of their way to screen dogs and families for the appropriate fit.

Remember that little kids' hands are often unsteady, or move very quickly — two things that can frighten a small dog or make him feel like his safety is threatened. And a very large-breed dog can easily knock over a young child. Maybe a medium-sized dog might be your best option.

Shy or introverted children may enjoy a more independent dog that does not

need constant entertainment, while more outgoing kids may favor a dog that follows them around.

Then there are some dogs that just don't love kids. They may have had little or no exposure to children, or, worse, a bad history with them. A dog who has been taunted or teased by a child in the past may be unable to trust again.

Hopefully the shelter or adoption agency will have some background information on the dog you and your family select to bring home.

The number-one precaution for kids and dogs is to supervise at all times.

Author, dog behavior counselor and trainer Brian Kilcommons sums it up best: "Leaving a dog alone with a child is like leaving two toddlers in the same room, one with a pair of scissors." Eventually something can go wrong. Even the best trained dog in the world could lash out if hurt or startled.

Once you bring Rover home, teach your child how to interact with him.

Show your child how to offer her closed fist for your new furry friend to sniff, then gently stroke the dog's head and neck, avoiding sensitive areas such as ears, tail, feet, and belly. Explain that poking, squeezing, or pulling at the dog isn't OK. Instruct your child never to put her face near a dog's



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Jay Jay and Corbin are a good combination.

face. The risk is always too great.

Never touch the dog when he is eating, chewing, or sleeping. And avoid rough play. This will encourage aggression.

Teach your child appropriate ways to play with your dog using safe toys. Involve older children in caring for the family dog. Seven to 8-year-olds can replenish food and water bowls and possibly 10-year-olds can help with grooming, practice basic commands, or

interact in a game of fetch. Depending on the dog's size and leash manners, an older child can take the dog out for short walks. This is a great way for children to start learning responsibility for other living things.

If your new dog shows repeated aggressive tendencies toward your children, seek professional veterinary advice immediately. Left untreated, these problems will only intensify with time.

Remember, always supervise!

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