

Day-One Dog Training

Parents, Puppies & Kids

By Howard Weinstein

“Despite all their stuffed animals, our two small children have been begging for a puppy. How old should kids be before we get a real dog?”

Hallelujah! I wish all parents would ask this question before surrendering to the kiddie crusade! When I was 9, I browbeat my own reluctant parents into adopting a puppy (for a single disastrous week). Adults think they're in charge, but when kids are determined, parental resistance may be futile.

I'm not saying, *"Don't get a puppy."* But take the time to do it right. If you don't, you may end up with terrorized children climbing up on couches to

escape a relentless puppy. I hate to see kids with bite marks, scratches and mixed feelings about the dog they'd wanted more than anything.

First, puppies are family pets, not tools for teaching kids responsibility. If kids learn some in the process, that's a bonus. But the ultimate responsibility for puppy care falls on parents, not kids.

Children will make all kinds of promises if that's what it takes to convince parents to get a dog. Don't fall for it. The reality of puppy care can be a rude awakening for everyone, leading kids to weasel out of chores, and giving parents an unpleasant choice: forcing kids to live up to promises, grudgingly doing the work themselves, or getting rid of the dog.

Before deciding to get a dog, make a list of all puppy-related jobs, determine which are age-appropriate for your child, and decide – *together* – which ones your child will do. Keep your expectations realistic. Then write up a contract and post it on the fridge. When the puppy arrives, enforce the deal – but not at the puppy's expense. A pet's needs must be met, even if parents have to do it. Be prepared to renegotiate the deal. Facing up to the consequences of choices and to their own limitations are valuable life-lessons for kids – and adults.

Choose a puppy of the right size and temperament. If your child is small and timid, then a boisterous retriever puppy may be more scary than lovable.

If your kids are rough-and-tumble bulldozers,



maybe you don't want a fragile toy breed.

Whatever dog you get, play between puppies and kids under twelve should *always* be supervised by an adult. Kids and puppies rarely hurt each other *intentionally*, but accidental injuries happen all the time. Toddlers may not grasp the difference between a stuffed animal and a live pup, and they often pull, poke, or fall on puppies. Are your kids able to understand that puppies may not want to be hugged all the time, or

dressed up in doll clothes? *Annoyed puppies will bite!*

Pups often view kids as human puppies, so they jump, play-bite and chase kids because that's how they learned to play with their littermates. Through training, you can turn "chase" games into "fetch" and teach puppies not to bite or jump. Parental supervision assures safe play – and quick intervention when necessary.

Appraise your child's maturity honestly. I've seen 7-year-olds who could train their puppies and 12-year-olds who couldn't. In general, kids over seven are old enough to be involved in training and care – to the extent they want to be. But forcing kids to participate is a surefire way to sour them on the whole process.

Puppies and most kids have short attention spans. So children who get bored during a one-hour group class may thrive on fifteen-minute training sessions done at home under your supervision (or with a trainer). When puppies respond to their commands, children feel an energized sense of accomplishment. And puppies who learn to accept direction from kids understand that even small humans are to be respected.

If your kids are younger, it's still possible to get a puppy. But Mom and Dad need to be certain they have the time and energy to simultaneously care for, supervise, and educate a small dog *and* small humans.

Be prepared, be flexible – and you may get the best out of your kids *and* your puppy!

Howard Weinstein is the author of *Puppy Kisses are Good for the Soul & Other Important Lessons You & Your Dog Can Teach Each Other* (available from Amazon.com, or direct from Day-One Dog Training).

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