



**How to support dogs and
children to
live happily
together**

**An essential guide for parents
and carers**

Introduction

Dogs and children can often be the best of friends, but safe, loving relationships need support from parents and carers.

Parents and carers often believe their own dog wouldn't bite. So it can be surprising to learn that up 91% of dog bites to children happen in the home, with dogs they know.

The good news is, we're here to help. This guide will give you the tools you need to create the environment, habits, and everyday actions that build a special bonds that lasts a lifetime.



Contents

All 3 sections give you the tools you need to put our advice into action

Section 1:

Teaching children to live happily with dogs

Section 2:

Supporting dogs to live happily with children

Section 3:

Guiding safe interactions between dogs and children





The Golden Rule

The Golden Rule is simple: increase the positives and reduce the negatives for both dogs and children. This is the key to building a strong, loving bond.

We know you can't avoid every tricky moment. By creating plenty of positive experiences, you'll help your dog cope better when your child does something unexpected — and vice versa.

In this guide, we'll show you which positives to focus on and which negatives to avoid, with the realities of busy family life in mind.

Follow these steps to help your child and dog build a stronger, happier, safer bond.

Let's get started!

Section 1

How to support children to live happily with dogs

The section will cover:

- The ABCs of being a dog's best friend
- Extra tips to keep younger children safe around dogs
- The Golden Rule in practice - simple, fun ways to create more positive moments for dogs and children



Section 1

How to support **children** to live happily with dogs

Children can be great companions for dogs. But even the most tolerant dog can sometimes find children's energy, noise, and unpredictability difficult.

When children learn how to behave safely around dogs, it helps dogs see them more positively. This helps dog to cope better with the small mistakes children sometimes make.

Just like in human relationships, a strong foundation of positive interactions makes the bond more resilient and flexible.

“I think when there's a bond and connection, they have elasticity to their relationship, which allows my dog to be more tolerant of my daughter.”

- Hannah (Dog owner and parent)

The 'ABCs of being a dog's friend' is key to achieving this!

Let's learn more...

Supporting



children

The ABCs of being a dog's best friend



Research shows that many dog bites to children happen during everyday interactions, often because of behaviour you might not expect. Dogs can struggle with being hugged, kissed, disturbed while eating or resting, or not being given the choice to move away.

The ABCs are simple rules that were created to help prevent these situations. They teach children safe, positive alternative ways to behave around dogs.

As well as teaching these to your children, role modelling the ABCs is the most powerful way for them to learn!

So, what does ABC stand for?



Show dogs **affection** in ways they understand



Give dogs space when they are **busy**



Give dogs **choice** at all times

Let's look at each more closely



Affection

Show dogs affection in ways they understand

It's natural for children to want to show dogs love with hugs and kisses. But this physical affection can make dogs feel trapped or worried, even with people they know and love.

Instead, teach your child to show affection by gently stroking or snuggling with your dog.





Affection

Show dogs affection in ways they understand



How to snuggle

Unlike hugs, snuggles mean your dog always has the choice to move away if they want to. Having choice helps dogs feel safe (more on choice later).

When our dogs snuggle with us, it's a sign they trust us and feel safe – it's the biggest compliment they can give!

Now let's think about B



Busy

Give dogs space when they are busy

This is perhaps the easiest one!

There are times when dogs are busy and need space to enjoy what they're doing without being touched, approached, or disturbed.

Dogs are busy when they are:

- **Eating or drinking**
- **Sleeping or resting**
- **Chewing or playing with a toy**

Top tip!

Have some alternative activities for children to do when dogs are busy such as reading, homework or some highly sought after screen time.

Now let's think about C



Choice

Give dogs choice at all times

Choice is essential for dogs' day-to-day happiness, overall wellbeing, and for keeping interactions safe.

So, when it comes to the ABCs, choice is the most important!

“ I feel like that really stresses dogs out when they feel like they've got no choice. ”

- Emma (Dog owner and parent)

But what does choice look like for dogs, and how do we give it to them?



Choice

Give dogs choice at all
times

Giving dogs choice is as easy
as...

Letting dogs choose
when to come to us



and letting dogs move
away, without following
them



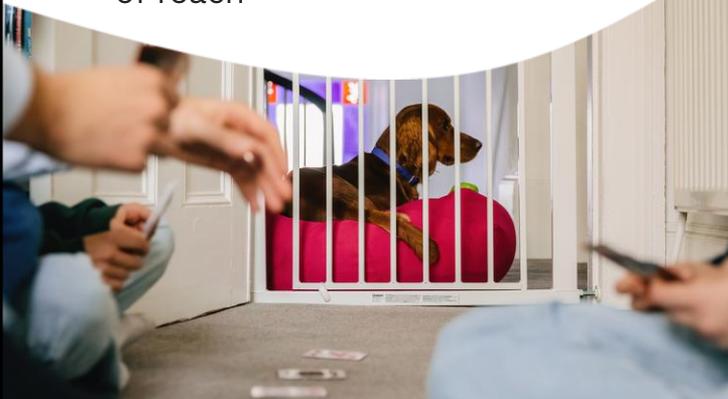
Extra tips to keep younger children safe around dogs



Not all children are ready for the ABCs, and infants and toddlers especially love to explore with their hands and faces.

Here are a few simple ways to help keep everyone safe and happy:

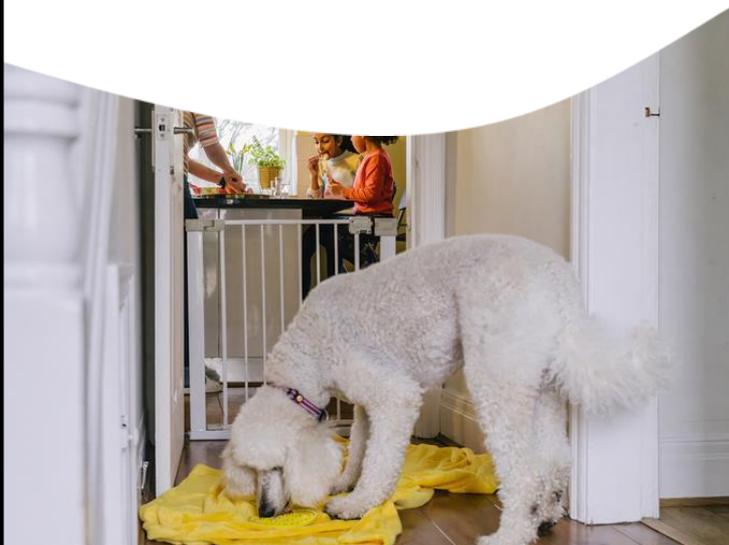
- Keep dogs and young children apart whenever you're distracted (this is an important rule for children of all ages)
- Use baby gates or playpens to create safe spaces for both
- Set up 'dog-only zones' where the dog's toys, bed, and chews stay out of reach



Extra tips to keep younger children safe around dogs



- Create ‘child-only zones’ where your dog doesn’t go, making that space calmer and easier to manage.
- Keep toys separate — dogs and toddlers often mix them up. Keep children’s toys out of your dog’s reach, and keep your dog’s toys away from curious little hands.



The Golden Rule

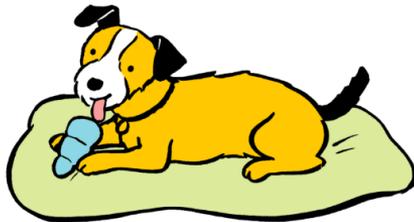
in practice

Simple, fun ways to create more positive moments for dogs and children

We already know the golden rule - strong child-dog relationships come from maximising positives and minimising negatives. Here are a few easy ways to add the positives.

Make good things happen around children

When your child is nearby, give your dog something they can enjoy calmly (like a chew or enrichment toy) so they learn to associate children with positive experiences. Children can also help prepare food or fill enrichment toys. Just remember to follow the ABCs and give dogs space when they're busy.



The Golden Rule



in practice

Simple, fun ways to create more positive moments for dogs and children

Train your dog together

It's great to include children in training that you do with your dog. Only use rewards and treats when training a dog, and never anything painful or scary.

Learn more about training. **click
here** 

Play safe games

Playing is a great way for dogs and children to have fun and build a bond, but it's important to keep games calm and controlled.

**Learn more about safe games they can
enjoy together.** **click
here** 

Section 1 recap

- 1.** Teach children the ABCs of being a dog's best friend: Affection, Busy, and Choice
- 2.** Keep dogs and children apart when you're busy, create dog-only and child-only zones, and keep their toys separate
- 3.** The Golden Rule in practice: make good things happen for dogs when children are around, train your dog together, and play safe games



Section 2

How to support dogs to live happily with children

The section will cover:

- Learn to talk dog
- Four key skills to teach your dog
- The Golden Rule in practice - quick wins to meet your dog's needs



Section 2

How to support dogs to live happily with children

Like us, dogs are happiest when they feel safe, relaxed, and understood - but the noise, activity, and unpredictability of busy family life can sometimes make it harder for even the most tolerant dog to feel this way.

When dogs are **supported** to live comfortably alongside families with children, it creates a strong foundation for safe, happy relationships. Over time, this builds flexibility and resilience into the bond dogs share with their families.

“Now they've got a wonderful relationship, but I think it just takes time. Like you have to put in the effort if you want that bond and to be a happy family with this dog.”

- Marie (Dog owner and parent)

Learning to understand your dog's body language, teaching them a few key skills, and meeting their needs sets everyone up for success.

Supporting



Let's get started

Learn to ‘talk dog’



Dogs are social animals who've learned to live happily alongside us. They work hard to keep the peace and prefer to avoid conflict whenever they can. To do this, they use lots of different body language signals. Some are easy to spot, but others are much more subtle and often go unnoticed.

Most of us recognise the more obvious signs, like growling, snarling, or even biting. But did you know these are actually a dog's last resort, a bit like when we raise our voices and shout? Like us, dogs would much rather avoid getting to that point if they can. Instead, they prefer to ‘whisper’ first. They may move away, lick their lips or tuck their tail to gently let you know they're feeling unsure or worried.

If you know what ‘**whispers**’ look like, and you respond to them quickly, dogs very rarely feel the need to shout! This is especially important when it comes to keeping dogs and children safe together.

Let's learn more about
‘whispers’

Learn to ‘talk dog’



When looking for ‘whispers’, you need to look at your dog’s whole body. Pay particular attention to their eyes, ears, mouth and tail as these can tell you a lot!

Top tip!

Here’s a fun activity for families to enjoy when learning about body language, especially ‘whispers’:

‘60-second I spy’

Watch your dog’s body language for 60 seconds and talk about what you see, and how your dog might be feeling. Work through body areas one at a time – ears, eyes, mouth, tail etc.

The following images give you lots of helpful examples of what ‘whispers’ look like.

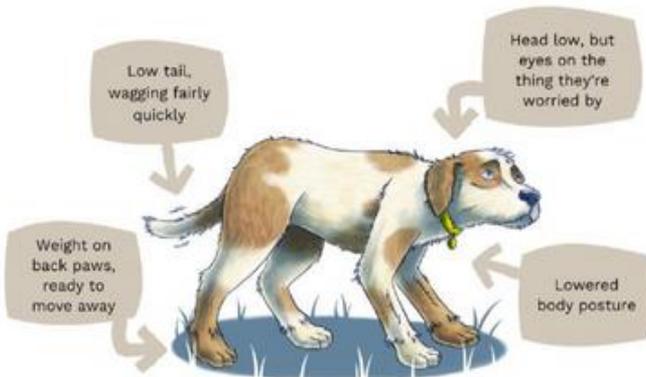
Learn to 'talk dog'



Spotting 'whispers'



Spotting any of these signals (or 'whispers') is your sign to act. This might mean putting a stop to what is worrying your dog or helping them to move away.



Remember, when we respond to their 'whispers', they don't need to 'shout'!

Learn to 'talk dog'



Spotting 'whispers'



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Remember, when we respond to their 'whispers', they don't need to 'shout'!

Take a look at the table below to learn more about what ‘whispers’ are telling us!

‘Whisper’	What You might See	What it means	What to do
Ears back	Ears pulled or tilted back	“I’m worried or unsure”	Stop the behaviour that is upsetting dog (i.e., noise, activity, interaction).
Tail tucked	Tail lower or between legs		
Lip licking / yawning	Frequent lip licks (not eating) or yawns (not sleepy)	“I feel nervous”	Give the dog space (i.e., move the children away and/or allow your dog to move away).
Turning away	Head or body turned away from a child, looking away	“I’d like some space right now”	Give your dog choice of what to do and where to go Let your dog choose when to re-engage
Relaxed, loose body	Soft posture, loose tail, relaxed face	“I’m calm and content”	Great job — keep doing what you’re doing!

Learn to ‘talk dog’



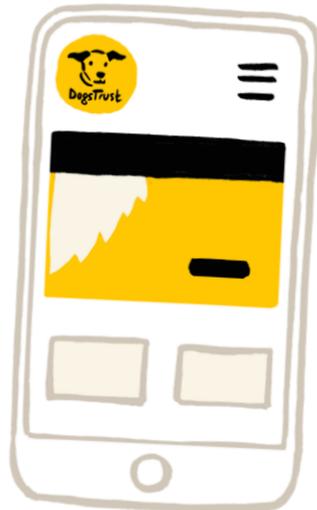
Now you know what some ‘whispers’ look like, the next step is spotting them with your own dog and acting quickly when you see them. Noticing and acting on ‘whispers’ keeps everyone safer and happier.

There’s so much more to learn about dog body language - click the links below to explore more Dogs Trust resources:

‘How to understand your dogs body language’



‘signs your dog is feeling anxious’



You can then test your knowledge with our dog body language [quiz!](#)

Four key skills to teach your dog



Here are four simple-to-train behaviours that every family dog should know.

Dogs who have been taught these skills are often happier, calmer, and more confident!

1. Settle

A 'settle' is when dogs can lie down and relax, without needing attention, when there are normal family distractions happening around them.



Teach your dog to settle!

**click
here**

Four key skills to teach your dog



2. Being comfortable on their own

If a dog can sleep, chew, play, or snuffle happily by themselves, it's a good sign they feel comfortable being alone.



Teach your dog to be comfortable on their own [click here](#) 

3. Come to you when called

It's important that dogs come back to us when called. And it's useful to be able to call them to another room, if you need to give dogs and children space from each other.

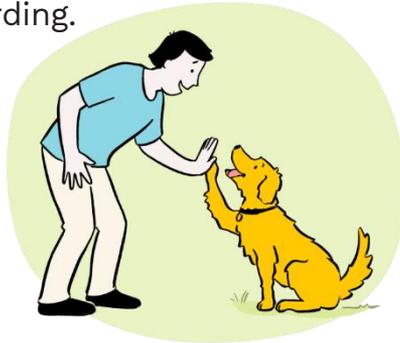
Teach your dog to come when called [click here](#) 

Four key skills to teach your dog



4. Drop or swap something they shouldn't have

From socks to remotes to a baby's dummy, your dog should be happy to give up items in exchange for a treat or something equally rewarding.



Teach your dog to drop or swap

**click
here** 

Top tip!

The key to successful dog training is rewarding your dog for the behaviours you want so that your dog knows to repeat them. This can include rewarding dogs for behaving calmly around children (and making sure children are calm and considerate too).

Getting help from a trainer

Finding the right dog trainer can feel overwhelming, with so many to choose from and lots of different methods promising quick results. Unfortunately, some trainers still use outdated techniques based on pain, fear, or punishment, such as shock collars or “being the boss” approaches. While these may seem effective at first, they can harm your dog’s trust, confidence, and wellbeing.

In contrast, reward-based trainers put your dog’s welfare at the heart of everything they do. Their focus is on building your dog’s confidence, strengthening your bond, and creating lasting, positive results.

How to find a reward-based trainer

click
here 

The Golden Rule

in practice

Quick wins to meet your dog's needs

Dogs are happiest when all of their needs are met, these quick wins can make a big difference!

Your dog needs to:

Eat, sleep, and rest undisturbed.

Giving dogs space when they are 'busy' is crucial to their wellbeing.

Top tip!

Build a 'doggy den' or put your dog's bed in a quiet spot where they will not be disturbed.



The Golden Rule

in practice

Your dog needs to:

Enjoy daily walks. Walkies are crucial to keep your dog's mind and body healthy.

Top tip!

Give your dog plenty of time to sniff. When they're out and about. Sniffing is SO important for a dog – it's like their version of social media!



The Golden Rule

in practice

Your dog needs to:

Use their brain. Creating opportunities for your dog to use their brain will help them to feel relaxed and contented. We call these opportunities 'mental enrichment' and it includes things like chewing, sniffing, reward-based training, playing, and other games.

[Learn more about mental enrichment](#)

click
here 



The Golden Rule

in practice

Your dog needs to:

See a vet regularly. All dogs benefit from yearly vet checks, but it's especially important to speak to your vet if you notice any changes in your dog's behaviour. This helps to rule out pain or illness, as dogs are very good at hiding when they're unwell. Just like us, being in pain can make dogs more sensitive, vulnerable, and less patient with things that bother them.



Section 2 recap

- 1.** Look out for ‘whispers’ and explore our other resources to learn more
- 2.** Teach your dog to settle, be comfortable on their own, come back when called, and drop or swap items
- 3.** The Golden Rule in practice - let your dog eat, sleep, and rest undisturbed, enjoy daily walks, use their brain, and have regular vet checks



Section 3

Guiding safe interactions between dogs and children

The section will cover:

- The 3 steps to guiding safe interactions:
 1. Stay close and pay attention
 2. Step-in
 3. Separate
- The Golden Rule in practice – making use of rewards



Section 3

Guiding safe interactions between dogs and children

You play a vital role in shaping the bond between your child and your dog and in helping them stay safe and happy together.

People often hear that dogs and children should be **supervised**, but there's rarely enough clear guidance on how to do this well.

Our advice makes supervision simple, clear, and easy to follow. Let's learn more about guiding safer interactions by following these 3 steps:

- 1. Stay close and pay attention**
- 2. Step-in**
- 3. Separate**

Guiding safe



interactions

1. Stay close and pay attention



The first step is to ‘**Stay close and pay attention**’. Being nearby when your child and dog are together often isn’t enough, especially if there are distractions. You need to notice the moments that matter and be close enough to step in when needed.

Staying close and paying attention means you can:

- Spot behaviours from your child that your dog might find worrying
- Notice ‘whispers’ or subtle body language from your dog that might mean they’re feeling uncomfortable.

Both are times to ‘**Step in**’ acting early helps prevent your dog from feeling the need to ‘shout’, which we learnt about in [section 2](#).



Let’s now look at how to ‘Step-in’

2. Step-in



The second step is to ‘**Step-in**’. The most important part of stepping-in is doing so as soon as you spot a problem. This might be when you see behaviour from your child that your dog might find worrying, or when you notice ‘whispers’ from your dog that might mean they’re feeling uncomfortable.

Here’s how to ‘Step-in’:

- Ask your child to stop what they’re doing
- Suggest a kinder way to act that’s in line with the ABCs
- Create some **space** between them by encouraging your child to move away or call your dog over to you.



Now let’s think about what to do when you know you’ll be busy or distracted

3. Separate



The third step is to ‘**Separate**’. This should be done whenever you’re distracted or busy and can’t ‘**stay close and pay attention**’ or when your dog or child needs more than just a little space.

Simple ways to separate:

- Use baby gates to create a barrier
- Get your dog to ‘settle’ in another room with a chew or toy
- Use a highchair or playpen to keep your child busy
- If you need to leave the room or know you’ll be distracted, and another adult is around, hand over supervision to them.



Important reminders!



Some reminders about why separation is so important:

- Many people believe that their own dog would not bite, but even the friendliest family dogs can react unexpectedly. Up to 91% of dog bites to children involve a dog they know or live with.
- Babies and toddlers are especially curious, and without you close by, their natural desire to grab, poke, and climb may be directed at your dog. Most dogs would find this worrying.
- Playful, loving children can accidentally upset a dog in seconds. Leaving them alone together simply isn't worth the risk.



The Golden Rule

in practice

Making use of rewards

The 3 steps sometimes mean giving space or separating, which might not feel positive. But with praise and rewards, they can still be fun and rewarding for both children and dogs.

Want to boost the positives? Try this:

- **Stay close and pay attention:**

Praise your child for using the ABCs. This encourages them to keep it up, and a reward chart can make it even more fun. Also praise and reward your dog for calm behaviour around your child.



The Golden Rule

in practice

Making use of rewards

- **Step-in:** If you need to move your child away from your dog, encourage them to do something enjoyable with you instead. This will give your dog some much needed space.



- **Separation:** If you move your dog to a different room to separate them from your child, make it fun! Give them their favourite toy or a treat to enjoy. This way, separation feels like a reward, not a punishment.

Section 3 recap

- 1.** Stay close and pay attention. Spot behaviours from your child that your dog might find worrying, and look out for ‘whispers’ from your dog.
- 2.** Step-in if needed by asking your child to stop what they’re doing, asking them to move away, or calling your dog over to you to give them space.
- 3.** Separate dogs and children if you’ll be busy or distracted using baby gates, highchairs, and playpens, or hand over responsibility to another adult.
- 4.** Use praise and rewards if you need to step-in or separate your child and dog, to make it a more positive experience for both.



Final reminders!

By teaching children the ABCs, watching for ‘whispers’, and following the 3 steps to safer interactions, you’re helping to build a safe, happy, and loving bond between your child and your dog.

Building positive bonds takes time. Start small and build routines gradually. Consistency, clear rules, and simple routines can set everyone up for success.

And finally, be kind to yourself. You don’t need to do everything perfectly straight away. What matters most is steady effort over time. Every positive interaction strengthens trust and brings your child and dog closer.

