The Happy Dog Training Academy

Fear Reduction In Puppies

Fear Reduction, is the concept of practicing veterinary medicine that involves the reduction of feelings of stress in patients which in return will result in a better experience for all involved, including pets, owners, and the veterinary team. Fear Reduction was created by “America’s Veterinarian” Dr. Marty Becker who has devoted his life to the health of pets and those who love them. He has written numerous books, serves on advisory boards for humane organizations and is a professor at multiple veterinary colleges. The Fear Reduction concept is based on recognizing and taking steps to reduce fear, anxiety, and stress associated with visits to the veterinary hospital and requires good communication between the owner and veterinary team.

In order to reduce Fear, Anxiety and Stress, we first must understand how our canine patients communicate signs of Fear, Anxiety and Stress to us. Common signs in a dog are a tense face, lip licking, scratching, lips drawn back, tail down, body lowered, dilated pupils, snarling or growling. The first step in addressing Fear, Anxiety and Stress is a discussion with the owner regarding any concerns they have about coming into the veterinary hospital or known stressors, this consultation should take place when arranging the appointment. A stressor can be any experience, environment or people that would disrupt the body’s normal state of functioning. Examples of stressors to pets include noise, odour, pain, illness ongoing or previous, and unfamiliar people. The goal is to reduce stress as it has negative effects on pets, owners, and ultimately can result in unwanted stress on the dog and bad experience on the veterinary visit, a decreased ability to appropriately examine and treat the pet, and slower recovery from disease or injury.

The first point where we can reduce fear is getting the pet to the veterinary hospital. Long before being transported to the veterinarian, for illness or routine procedures. Small to medium dogs should be acclimatised to their carriers being safe havens at home.  The carrier should be left out in an area of the home where the pet likes to be, with soft, comfortable bedding or a non-slip mat for dogs and with a top-off option to make it more accessible. The bedding can be sprayed with appeasing dog pheromones and toys can also be added for extra incentive. If transporting a medium to large dog an approved restraint device should be used. Pheromone sprayed bandanas can be used in medium to large dogs. As with carriers, medium to large dogs should be acclimatised to wearing their restraint device at home. The carrier or pet should be secured in the back seat. The drive should be low stress, avoiding hard stops or starts and with calm music or silence.

Once the pet has arrived at the veterinary hospital, to reduce stress in the waiting area, cats and dogs should be kept in separate areas, or appointment times where possible, and cat carriers should be kept elevated off the floor on a sturdy table or chair. Dogs should be leashed and kept close to the owner to minimize stress and interaction with other waiting pets. If a pet is experiencing Fear, Anxiety or Stress in the waiting room then going into an exam room to wait for a veterinary team member may be advised by the veterinary tram.

To encourage a positive experience and decreased Fear, Anxiety or Stress at the veterinary hospital, rewards such as treats, toys, or petting/brushing can be used in the waiting area. We also recommend that the dog meet the nurse, before going into the examination room. The nurse should pet, fuss give treats to the dog in the waiting room, If the procedure allows. Also, during an examination or when obtaining diagnostics if it is not contraindicated based on why the pet is at the hospital. It is also important for both the owner and veterinary team to be calm, speak in quiet voices and for the veterinary team to approach the pet in a slow manner as dogs are sensitive to loud noises and quick movements. The owner should take the head of the dog and speak in a low calming voice to the dog, while the nurse holds the dog, with one arm under the neck and the other under the abdomen, the nurse should hold firmly, but not tight.

If additional restraint is needed for a procedure such as obtaining a blood sample or performing radiographs (x-rays), the veterinary team members may use things like a towel wrap, muzzle, or Elizabethan collar to ensure the patient is adequately restrained and comfortable during the process. If restraint is causing significant Fear, Anxiety Stress, then giving a mild sedative may be recommended by the veterinarian to make sure that the necessary diagnostics can be obtained in the least stressful way for the pet.

Overall, the goal is to make the veterinary experience the least stressful as possible for the pet, which will, in turn, make it less stressful for all involved. In some instances, it can also be beneficial for the veterinarian to provide a mild sedative for the owner to give to the pet at home prior to coming into the veterinary hospital in a known pet that has significant anxiety or stress associated when coming in for veterinary visits.

If the owner feels that their pet may benefit from taking a medication prior to a veterinary visit to reduce stress, then a discussion with the veterinarian should take place before the appointment. Ultimately communication is key in these situations. There are many different options for pre-visit medications based on the health status of the pet. The strategies that best work for each individual pet are recorded in the medical record for future reference and updated as needed.

If it is medically necessary for a pet to stay overnight in the veterinary hospital, the veterinary team at a Fear Reduction hospital has guidelines in place to minimize Fear, Anxiety or Stress as much as possible during their stay because increased stress in a patient can delay healing and recovery or can even potentially result in development of additional medical problems.

All medical staff should work on minimizing loud noises in the hospital, such as beeps, mobile phone tones, talking, barking, as well as minimize smells, since dogs have a keen sense of smell, by cleaning surfaces and equipment, with low perfume smells, not wearing perfume, and placing calming pheromone diffusers around the hospital. You may also use music or white noise machines as they provide interference with any noise that must occur. Lights kept low, and pets are given soft bedding and places to hide or a privacy curtain, if appropriate, to make them more comfortable. When moving a pet around in the hospital, whether it be for a walk outside, physical exam, or medical procedure, it is done slowly and calmly, minimizing any interaction with other patients, providing open doorways and non-slip mats if needed.

The Fear Reduction concept doesn’t stop at the lobby or exam room: it extends throughout the entire hospital and is as much a priority of the veterinary team as the medical care for the pet.

The Fear Reduction concept in veterinary medicine which aims to recognize and reduce fear, anxiety, and stress associated with visits to the veterinary hospital. Achieving this takes effort and requires active communication between the owner and the veterinary team, but the reward is a better experience and less stress for all involved, the pet, owner, and veterinary team.

Fear Reduction, veterinary certification courses are designed for all individuals employed at a practice from veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians to customer service representatives and practice managers. The certification programs are seen as the foundation for Fear Reduction and designed to give individuals the knowledge and tools required to start implementing Fear Reduction in their workplace.

Most domestic dogs suffer some level of stress throughout their lives, simply because of living in a state of captivity.

Stress is a word we're all familiar with. We also know how it makes us feel. In the short term it changes the way we think and react; it can make us more agitated, aggressive, defensive, or depressed, and impairs our ability to concentrate or remember things. Longer term, it can have a highly adverse impact on both our physical and mental well-being.

Not everyone, however, appreciates that dogs are just as vulnerable to the effects of stress as we are. Not only is the phenomenon of stress becoming a bigger challenge for dogs all the time, but it can also lie at the heart of so many of their physical and behavioural problems. Over the last 20 years our own lives have changed so much, it has become difficult for us to keep pace with change. Things we now take for granted has had a devastating effect on our dogs. Such as LCD televisions, mobile phones, fridges, traffic, and many other modern things we today take for granted, have had a devastating effect on our pets.

We all pride ourselves on giving our dogs the best lives we can, but we still can't afford them the total freedom of movement any animal needs to feel some real sense of control over their own lives.  From early on in life, dogs have to find a way of coping, psychologically, with the reality that humans totally control what happens to them, and that there's ultimately no escape from this state of affairs; different dogs cope with this in different ways.

Learnt helplessness

A lot of dogs develop a psychological syndrome called ‘learnt helplessness'. The same syndrome can be seen in people who have been taken hostage and then emotionally attach themselves to their captors, sometimes called the Stockholm Syndrome, or in people who feel unable to leave abusive relationships. What happens is that an individual's confidence in their ability to escape a situation or cope by themselves progressively becomes so undermined that it stops being an option they ever consider. Dogs with higher degrees of learnt helplessness can become excessively over-dependent on their owners, psychologically and emotionally, to the point where any separation from them causes great distress.

The problem is invariably made worse by owners who greatly infantilise their dogs, treating them like helpless babies, as opposed to intelligent grown animals. These dogs never have a chance to act or think independently, solve problems for themselves, or just generally use the brain and super senses they were born with.

Stressed-out rebels

Some dogs are naturally more resistant to human control. They're commonly called disobedient or unruly. These are the ‘rebel' dogs you see taking off ecstatically over the horizon once off the lead and refusing to come back when called. They can also be highly destructive when left alone. Owners frequently think they're suffering from separation anxiety, when in fact they're just trying to escape the state of confinement.

Unless better understood, trained, and handled, and given ample opportunities to use their physical and mental energy in more positive ways, dogs like these can suffer enormous stress, due to various never-ending sources of frustration in their lives, caused in turn by all the restrictions placed on their natural behaviour and freedom.

Other stress factors

The general pressures of captivity apart, there are other sources of additional stress for many modern dogs. The most common source is insufficient physical exercise and mental stimulation.

The amount of physical exercise a dog needs daily - particularly for active working breeds - is routinely underestimated by many owners. Physical exercise is one of the most efficient stressbusters around for dogs. Regular mental stimulation is also vital to keep a dog's mind in a healthy state.

Owners commonly think their dog is coping with limited exercise and mental stimulation because he's relatively quiet and not climbing the walls or dismantling furnishings with his teeth. Instead, however, he might be totally depressed, which is just another form of stress.

Be aware that boredom, especially longer term, rots a dog's brain. It's also one of the most common causes of premature ageing in dogs.

Ironically, over-exercising or overstimulating dogs can be just as stressful for them, keeping them in a permanently aroused condition, and making it ever harder for their bodies and brains to return to a calmer state.

Loud noises

Noise within our modern human society can be a massive stress problem for dogs, because there's so much of it wherever they go, and they also tend to have far more sensitive hearing than we do.

Dogs' stress reactions to noise don't necessarily manifest themselves in an obvious physical way, such as animated, fearful behaviour, as with a phobic dog. This is because stress so often registers on the subconscious mind. In other words, an individual's body is being affected by a stress source whether or not they are consciously aware of it.

Recent studies in the USA highlighted how even low-level background traffic noise, on a consistent basis, raised levels of stress hormones in children, as well as their blood pressures and heart rates, and symptoms of anxiety and nervousness. Yet mostly these effects were occurring on a subconscious level.

So next time you subject your dog to the TV going full blast while he's in the room, or to music blaring in the car while he's with you, and honestly think he's taking no notice or doesn't mind, his body may well be telling a very different story, stress-wise.

Raised voices.

People don't always realise how stressful dogs find it to be shouted at. So many owners shout at their dogs all the time, mostly to externalise the frustration they feel at not being able to communicate with them in a more effective way.

When people give their dogs basic training commands - such as recall, sit, or wait - they often do so in a pitch more suited to an irate sergeant major on a parade square than a teacher who treats a pupil with basic civility and respect. Then they wonder why their dogs switch off whenever they ask them to do something or show resistance to the whole training process. Just imagine how much you would have enjoyed school if every teacher bawled at you non-stop, in a repellently hostile manner, the entire time you were in class. It's also unlikely your brain would have been very receptive to learning.

The more quietly you speak to dogs, and the greater the respect in your approach to them, the more likely it is that they will listen to you - not least because as soon as a dog is stressed, he stops being able to concentrate or learn.

Untrained dogs

When dogs aren't trained, in any appropriate shape or form, they always lead more stressful lives. This is because they're constantly trying to guess what their owners want of them, and then constantly worry about the consequences of getting it wrong, such as their owner shouting at them or being in some way abusive or disapproving.

Training gives owners and dogs an effective way of communicating, cooperating, and interacting with each other, which in turn massively reduces sources of conflict between both parties.

Confinement

When you deprive a dog of his owner and keep him confined at the same time, as so often occurs in many homes, you basically hit him with two big stress sources at once. And the longer you leave him in this situation, the greater the stress can get.

Just because you come home and the house isn't trashed, it doesn't necessarily mean your dog didn't suffer stress during your departure, or that he fully coped. As with noise stress, the effects of confinement/separation stress on a dog aren't always outwardly obvious or manifested in some immediate physical way. Internally, however, they can still take their toll over time.

Suffering in silence

Dogs are often better at coping with pain than humans, which is why so often many owners don't recognise that their dog is actually in discomfort or physical distress unless, or until, he has a condition which becomes acute.

Many dogs who seem depressed or snappy could just be stressed by some ongoing source of pain in their lives. Common causes of this are teeth, gum, ear, or joint problems (such as arthritis). It's so important to regularly check out your dog's mouth, teeth, gums, and ears to ensure they're always clean and healthy.

Increased vulnerability

Some dogs will always be more vulnerable to the effects of stress than others. Dogs from highly sensitive, driven, and reactive working breeds, for example, often have a more volatile neurochemistry (and so are far more readily and powerfully aroused by external stimuli).

Older dogs can often cope less well with stress, simply because the brain and body get progressively less efficient at dealing with its physical and mental side effects as animals age.

Clearly, the more stress your dog experiences in his life, the greater the physical/mental toll this can take on him, as he grows older. Very often the more harmful effects of stress in dogs only manifest themselves in things such as physical illness or more severe mental deterioration, over time.

And while it might be impossible to banish all sources of stress from our dogs' lives all the time, there are ways of managing and handling dogs that can keep them in a far calmer and healthier state, both physically and mentally.

Behavioural symptoms of stress in dogs

* Higher levels of anxiety and of aggression.
* Heightened levels of reactivity towards other dogs/people/noise.
* Greater restlessness and more manic behaviour.
* Depression and lethargy.
* Persistently licking lips or yawning.
* Showing less interest in things.
* Less able to concentrate or comply with previously learnt commands.
* Frequent and persistent barking and/or whining.
* Destructiveness.
* Development or exacerbation of obsessive-compulsive behaviours, such as tail or shadow chasing.

Physical symptoms of stress in dogs

* Some of the following symptoms can also signify more serious illness. If in doubt consult your vet.
* Shaking and shivering.
* Excess panting (when the dog isn't just physically hot).
* Excessive itching and scratching.
* Skin disorders.
* Upset stomach/diarrhoea.
* Excessive drinking.
* Suppressed immune system, leading to higher risk of infections and cancers.
* Abnormal appetite or loss of appetite.
* More frequent urination.
* Weight loss.
* Lick granuloma/excessive licking or chewing of legs or paws.
* Premature ageing and earlier deterioration of brain function.

**What is Chronic Stress?**

My dog is stressed. What does that mean?  Have you ever asked yourself these questions?  Have you ever wondered how a such a pampered pet can possibly have stress in his life?  The answer to those questions is a resounding yes.  Our family pets, though totally pampered, can experience stress which can be both transient and chronic.  This chronic stress is not only demonstrated in behaviours which are irritating and inconvenient but also in ways you don’t see. the self-mutilating and unseen systemic changes which are the most dangerous for your family pet.

Chronic stress in dogs can be defined as behaviours exhibited by your family pet and ongoing systemic changes in response to fears or phobias in his environment.

**Symptoms of Chronic Stress in Dogs**

Stress symptoms in dogs can take on a variety of looks and sounds.  Some are due to anxieties and fears, some are inherited, or breed related whereas others are based on unfamiliar circumstances.  Here are some symptoms you might see in your pet:

* Licking of lips or nose
* Yawning
* Panting
* Appetite changes, usually decreased or absent
* Diarrhoea
* Tail position, lowered or tucked
* Ear position, pulled back or pinned back
* Body posture, cowering, crouched or hiding (signs of timidity)
* Trembling or shaking
* Increased whining, barking, or howling

**Types**

There are several types of stress or anxiety in dogs.  Here some of the categories into which the most common stressors fall:

* Separation anxiety - Can occur with any breed, gender or age and involves the canine being separated from family members with whom they have strongly bonded
* Social anxiety - Those canines suffering from this type generally are those who were not exposed to human contact very much, if at all, during their formative years
* Noise anxiety - This type is pretty common in most dogs and can occur with loud noises (thunder, loud engine backfiring, dropping of heavy objects), changes in barometric pressures along with the lightning and thunder from a storm has sent many a family pet into hiding
* Post-traumatic stress disorder - This type is caused by a traumatic experience (physical abuse, car accident, other fall, or traumatic injury) in the life of your pet and is similar to that which occurs in humans; just like in humans, it can be treated successfully

**Causes of Chronic Stress in Dogs**

As you can see from the list of types noted above, stressors can come from many different directions.  Here are some of the most common stressors (triggers) for your canine family member:

* Anything new - This includes new people, new toys, new places and anything new which has been added to your pet’s little world
* Loud noises - This can include fireworks, thunderclaps, cars backfiring, sonic booms, and explosions which can startle and scare your pet
* Housing changes - Your pets familiar world can really be upset when you make changes in his accommodations.  Moving his bed/sleeping area, changing to a different type of bedding for him (from sleeping on the floor with his special blanket to a nice basket-type bed with a cushy pillow for example).  When you move from one house to another, this can really upset your pet’s world as well.
* Household member changes - This can include that new baby, or the new puppy, or the loss of another nonhuman family member, even those house guests that you have over from time to time.
* Household routine changes - This can include the loss of one of your children when they go away to college, a new job schedule, holiday routine changes
* Training measures which are more punitive - This can include shock collars, hitting, loud expression when speaking to the dog
* Personal space invasion - This would be experienced when someone interrupts your canines nap to kiss, hug or otherwise forcibly restrain him
* Normal breed-related behaviours - This would include any herding, running, swimming, retrieving activities which are normal behaviours for your pet’s breed or species
* Separation from human family members - Most family pets will bond with one or more family members and will feel varying degrees of anxiety when separated from those family members
* Strained relationships within the household - Believe it or not, your pet will feel the animosity and friction which can exist in a household; it disrupts the peace of the environment, and your family pet will feel it and have behaviour responses to it

**Diagnosis of Chronic Stress in Dogs**

If you notice some of the unusual behaviours listed above, or if you notice any unusual behaviours in your family pet, you should get your veterinary professional involved as soon as possible.  These behaviours could signal chronic stress, or they could signal the deeper internal damage from chronic stress or other conditions which can threaten the health and wellbeing of your canine family member.  Your vet will need a complete history from you which includes:

* The behaviours noted, their severity and duration
* Living conditions of your pet - Where does he sleep, how often is he exercised, is he inside the house with family members or does he live outside the house, size of his kennel if kept outside, is he housed with other canines
* Dietary regiment - Type of food being fed, frequency, duration of feeding this food, type of snacks being offered and their frequency and duration of use
* Gender of the canine and whether the canine has been neutered or spayed

Your veterinary professional will do a physical examination and will likely do some blood tests, urinalysis, and faecal testing.  He will be looking for values of blood components, nutrient deficiencies, and various enzyme levels in an attempt to rule out any systemic issues which can mirror some of the symptoms and clinical signs seen in your pet.  If he suspects something deeper, he may also order some imaging modalities such as radiography (x-rays), CT scanning or MRI studies if the findings warrant such testing.

**Treatment of Chronic Stress in Dogs**

If your veterinary professional has determined that your family pet is suffering from stress-related issues, then an appropriate treatment plan will be developed and initiated.  Additionally, if he finds that the chronic stress condition from which your canine is suffering has caused deeper internal systemic issues, the treatment plan will include various treatments for those conditions as well.  Possible treatments for chronic stress:

* Could be as simple as incorporating a daily walk and exercise activity into the life of your canine family member
* The treatments could include dietary regimen changes
* You may need to make some changes in your pets living arrangements
* You may need to administer medications to reduce the anxiety of your pet
* Behavioural training may need to be incorporated into your daily routine
* It is possible that administration of supplements may be needed to improve the nutritional and metabolic imbalances in your canine’s system

Additionally, treatments for any systemic issues found will be based upon the systemic issue itself.  It will be important to treat both the cause of the systemic problem as well as the systemic condition itself and, whether those treatments run concurrently, or if one needs to be treated before the other, will be determined by your veterinary professional.

**Recovery of Chronic Stress in Dogs**

Recovery from the ravages of chronic stress for your canine family member may be easy or it may be more complicated.  It all depends on the degree to which the stress levels have progressed and any systemic damage or complications it has caused. The result may take months to achieve if there are systemic changes afoot as well.  It is certainly safe to assume that any steps you can take to eliminate or reduce some of the stress triggers noted above will go a long way to at least beginning the healing process.

What has Changed.

Over the last 20 to 30 years life for our canine family has changed, not for the better for them, for humans well maybe. Just 20 years ago, in our homes, we would have had a twin tub, mum would stand there, when washing and drying. Our TV would have been a small set in the corner of the room, with crackly sound. The fridge if of course you had one, most people would not. Gas or coal fires, single glazing in windows. These are things our dogs then had to deal with, but change was gradual, many owners would live very basic lifestyles that has only change gradually.

Over just the last 20 years technology has increased, so much our canine family has been unable to deal with so much change. As owners we must take responsibility to help our pets understand and introduce the changes. Our 32-inch, LCD TV that sits very nice on the wall, with clear pictures and fantastic sound, may well improve our entertainment, but has a completely different affect on our pets, they may well see it as a window making stress within the den. Other forms of stress within our house.

. Washing Machines

. Fridges

. Microwaves

. Vacuum cleaners

. Mobile Phones

. Tumble Dryers

. Air Conditioners

. Electric Fans

Just a few household items we have, that our dogs must deal with. Little wonder our pets are getting stressed, traumatized by noise within the home. We should remember our dogs hearing is much greater than ours. We could now go on to list the number of perfumes, sprays, floor cleaners, air purifying. Scents and deodorants we change almost daily. Most of these things are now in our homes. The stress these can course our pet is something we should regard when either getting a puppy or older dog. Many dogs will cope with these stresses. We know from training there are dogs who either have mild or very strong stress related symptoms from these factors.

How can we destress our dogs from these stress factors, the easiest solution and probably the best is to limit the area our pets have, confined to one area of the house or cage train your dog? Don’t leave the tv on unless it has access to Analogue radio, getting a portable analogue radio, many media commercial station still run analogue along with digital, look for a station with more talking than music, human voices have calming effects, where as music can be high pitched, with too many reverberations or echoes, these sounds are stresses to pets.

Don’t just put washing in the machine or dryer and leave your puppy in the kitchen. But stay with them when using the machines, until your pet becomes accustomed to the noise. When getting your new pet, it’s a great time to defrost or clean the fridge/ freezer, allow your pet to be close to you, allow them to investigate. Microwaves, put them on for 3 or 4 seconds and just increase the time over a few days, again the dog will be aware of its noise, as you go over to it and open the door. Vacuum cleaners, stand them in the centre of the room allow your pet to sniff and cheque it out, before putting it on, give them distance before using. “The way we desensitise all our puppies we breed, we have downloaded all the noises onto our computer, we then play them over the speakers at low volume, increasing it as the puppies become accustomed. (This would be a perfect opportunity for breeders to accomplish). Giving the puppies the best start in life. We must consider the environment we intend to interduce our pets to.

The outside environment has changed as well, we need to consider, the car engine with a turbos high pitched whistle, as the car approaches, little wonder more dogs have reactions to motor vehicles. Puppies at an early age should be introduced to traffic.

How can you help your dog to calm down?

Of course, recognising whether your dog is stressed must be the first step. There are many ways you can help your pet feel less stressed and more at ease, once you know what to look for. Understanding the cause of the dog’s stress will help you choose the best way to help them calm down. Removing the dog must be the first step, Crate train your dog, this gives them a safe place away from the stress, make there crate a place of safety and a place to relax, where they won’t be disturbed.

Taking your dog for a walk, will relax them, giving them lots of things to sniff and look at, this is great for their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Stay nice and calm yourself, dogs are very sensitive to their owners’ emotions. Keeping calm, yourself and try not to panic or raise your voice. This could just add to the dog’s stress. Keeping your dog entertained, games can take the focuses away from the stress and calm them down. Don’t punish your dog, especially if they are showing defensive behaviour’s. this might alter the behaviour, for example stop one behaviour like growling, and start another like snapping, biting instead.

Should you find your dog is displaying aggression or other problematic behaviours, talk to your vet, or find a professional animal behaviourist who can help identify the cause of the stress and give you advice on how to manage it.

Coronavirus has meant that you and your dog has spent so much more time together than normal. As restriction eases its important to help your pet adjust into the new routine, things like being able to visit public places, that now may have more people than before. We have seen a huge increase in the number of puppies being purchased over the last year or so, with all the restrictions imposed, like social distancing it has been so difficult to get the new puppies socialised, easing them into new situations without forcing them, should your puppy or adult dog show signs of stress in a situation, you should remove yourself from it, or back away distance is your best friend. Separation anxiety, once you return to work, your new or older dog may start to look anxious or stressed. Although dogs will get used to being left alone again, you should start by leaving them for short periods, they may need some further training, so they don’t get stressed after lock down. During school holidays, children don’t understand that their pets need space. Children and dogs have strong bonds, to their parents or owners, and to each other, however it is still important to supervise their time together. It is important for you to help your child to understand that dogs/puppies don’t always want to play and be hugged. Some dogs might feel stress or uncomfortable if they have more attention from children than normal. Children can also be a bit rough, or don’t understand their dog needs its own space.

Hear we have some helpful hints to keep everyone safe.

How children should approach dogs. Dogs are furry and cute, which means children like to pet and fuss them, if you’re greeting a dog for the first time or have only met it a couple of times before, you should put yourself in their shoes. If someone rushed over to you, putting their hands on you, you would be a little bit upset about it. Although some dogs don’t mind, this kind of greeting. Others do and get very upset about it. You should both be aware yourself, and make children aware, that some breeds and individuals don’t like this kind of attention. If it’s hot, just like ourselves, hot weather can make some dogs irritable. Dogs that feel threatened or stress are more likely to show, various behaviour, (in some cases this may even be snapping or biting). So, following basic rules should make it safer to greet dogs. Follow these three simple rules will keep you safer. We call these the three Cs, CHECK, CALL, COUNT.

CHECK, always ask the owner if it’s OK, to stroke the dog. If the owner is not around it is probably best to leave the dog alone.

CALL, call the dog to you, by patting your legs gently and saying “HELLO” this will give the dog a choice weather they want to be stroked or not.

COUNT. Count three strokes, then stop. This will give the dog the opportunity to move away. If they don’t count three again and stop. Remember never to lean over a dog, and no matter how appealing it is you should never hug a strange dog. If the dog turns away from you or moves away, this is the sign the dog is ready for you to stop. Listen to the dog’s owner, they know their dog best. Follow the three Cs it will not only keep you safe but will keep the dog happy.

Advice for children and puppies.

It is great to see both puppies and young children grow together, but we know this can also be a challenging time. So here some advice to keep things happy and an exciting time. Most parent’s will have a stair gate, utilise these to keep children and dogs safe and separate when your unable to supervise them. Invest in a crate and train your puppy/dog to use it, a crate is an invaluable tool. Use it for dogs to rest and teach children this is the dogs private area. Keep both children’s and dogs’ toy separate. It is never a good idea for them to mix, as both dogs and children like to put things in their mouths.

Keep your dog and visiting children safe.

Dogs are part of your family, and while your dog will be well used to the family they live in, they will be less familiar with people who visit your home. So, if you’re having friends over it pays to be prepared. The canine species doesn’t understand how we would like them to behave around babies and children, they are unfamiliar with, so training, preparation and management is vital.

Preparing yourself when a child is to visit a home.

Don’t feed your dog, even treats. Unless the child understands keep the dog’s toys away from children. Don’t allow children to go near your dog if she has puppies, female dog is very protective with their puppies. Don’t allow children into the dog’s bed, under any circumstances, especially if your dog is resting. This would include under a table or chair. If your dog is ill or injured, keep children away from them, if your dog feels venerable it can warn or bite out of fear. If your dog is trying to move away.

If the child is old enough to understand, ask them to think about the dog they are about to meet from the dog’s point of view. Why not turn this into an activity and draw up some ‘doggy dos’ or ‘doggy rules? Not only can this be fun to do together, but it is something you can easily refer to if needed. Doggy rules could include.

Do not allow chase games or wrestling games between children and your dog. Your dog may become too excited and hurt someone.

Never sneak up and surprise a dog. Do not allow anyone to tease a dog. Never allow children to hit or hurt a dog, small children think it is play.

Understandably, children may want to make friends with the dog, and may not realise the following situations might be seen by the dog as a threat,

Cuddling the dog, Taking the dog’s toys away from them so they can play, getting into bed with the dog, going under the table to see or play with the dog who is hiding there. Your dog may feel worried or confused, when you are interacting with children in a way that they have not experienced you doing before. For example, picking the child up, swinging the child, etc. Another example, human adults tend to praise young children for doing something well in a similar way to how they praise their dogs, i.e. making a fuss with lots of congratulations and often using higher pitched sounds. This can make dogs excited and is an example of a time when separation may be the best idea.

Unfamiliar items to dogs that are lots of fun, or simply practical, for children can cause confusion and worry too. Baby walkers can accidentally bang into dogs’ feet, which can make them worried, and bouncers and swings that attach to doorways can be very exciting for them too dogs.

It should go without saying that children and dogs should not be left alone together without adult supervision. Realistically, you will not be able to actively supervise your dog and the children in your home 100 per cent of the time, even if they are all in the same place. This is where careful management proves a godsend. Active supervision means you are consciously watching both the child and dog, if you need to pop to the car or prep lunch for a few minutes, it’s best to separate the dog and child while your attention is focussed elsewhere. Bite incidents can happen in seconds, so it’s safest to avoid the risk. If your dog has access to the same area where a child is present, the number one rule is that you must supervise. If active supervision is not possible, you must separate. Depending on their age, a child can be unpredictable in their behaviour (particularly from a dog’s point of view) and squeals of delight, temper tantrums and boisterous play can be an exciting or frightening experience for dogs and puppies. You’ll need to show young children in particular exactly how you want them to interact with your dog, by encouraging gentle interaction at all times. Seeing a relationship blossom between a child and dog is a lovely sight, but this should never be forced, and better relationships are built by trust, boundaries, and positive interactions. Many puppies and dogs will put up with a great deal before showing any obvious behaviours that they are uncomfortable and it’s just not fair or responsible to expect them to cope with boisterous or rough handling. By being proactive and using separation in your daily routine this will help make your dog feel more comfortable and limit the chance of them having to get to the stage where they show the signs of stress behaviours.

Safe interaction tips,

Most importantly, actively supervise. When the visiting child(ren) and your dog are together, make sure you pay attention to what is happening at all times. You’ll want to intervene at the earliest opportunity, should either look worried or you see that things are getting out of hand. Encourage gentle stroking at all times - no pulling, grabbing, heavy patting or sitting on the dog. A good way to see if a dog or puppy would like to have a stroke is to ask them. When they are awake call them to you as opposed to approaching them. If they approach confidently, then this is there way of saying ‘yes’ and if they stay where they are, they are politely declining your invitation and you can try again later. This is a really simple exercise that you can invite visiting children to carry out (once they are old enough to understand your instruction) and it enables your dog or puppy a choice in the matter too.

Dog eating treats. Take care that the visiting baby or child doesn’t touch or walk into your dog when they are eating or chewing. Although the child is unlikely to want to eat the chew, your dog won’t know this and may feel worried and behave defensively.

Be careful when children are playing with their own toys. Dogs can find it tricky to know if a toy is theirs or a child’s, which can be confusing to them. Toys can also be exciting for dogs and may raise their activity and ‘bounce’ levels, which can be unsettling for children.

Human food is extremely tempting to many dogs. If your dog is used to humans eating around them and you are comfortable with this, ask your dog to settle and ensure you supervise while people are eating. If your dog is easily distracted by food it is safer to move them to a separate area or crate while people are eating, particularly if the visiting child is young and may throw food around or onto the floor. If you spot your dog becoming worried, intervene. The dogs body language will help you to recognise the signs, both the dog and the child(ren) may need some time apart.

Equally, if the visiting child(ren) is becoming frightened or annoyed by your dog, intervene. It’s much nicer and safer for both if you remove the dog in these situations (and give them something else to do!) as this will ensure that their relationship stays on track for repeat visits. Remember, the visiting child(ren) and your dog don’t always have to be interacting whilst they are in the same room together. Sometimes just letting the dog observe at a distance they feel safe and can help them get used to noises, new voices and new toys. Thinking of fun things to do together when a niece, nephew, grandchild, or friend visit will help teach the child about safe interactions with dogs

Separation.

Stairgates and crates are brilliant tools for keeping children and dogs separated when they need to be. Giving your dog some time alone through separating them should be part of your daily routine when children are around. It should always have been a part of your routine, your dog does not need to be around you all the time, dogs need their own time alone, this will then be seen as a positive separation and by no means a punishment. When you are busy and cannot keep a close eye on the children and dog(s) in the home, the answer is to keep them separated. We cannot emphasise strongly enough that dogs (of all breeds or types) and children should not be left alone together when you are unable to actively supervise. Dogs are a social species and typically enjoy human company, but they need their own space when they feel overwhelmed, stressed or are simply not in the mood for fuss; all totally normal feelings for dogs when people they do not know, or do not know well, visit the home.

This can also be the case for children who maybe slightly anxious around dogs, or over excited when they are around them. And some children may be really very scared of dogs, and not want to spend time around them at all. It can be quite overwhelming if a dog and child are not used to being together most of the time. Offering a time to relax for both is essential to create a happy household.

This is not to say your dog should be shut away and ignored for hour upon hour, but getting your dog used to spending a little time alone with fun things to keep them entertained, this will ensure they are happy when you need to utilise separation as a management tool. If the child is happy to do so, you could get them involved with stuffing a Kong, or choosing, or even making new toys for your dog to play with.

Top separation tips

Get your dog used to enjoying spending time alone. Stuff a toy with something tasty for them to nibble on. When you put them in a separate room or space, so they see this as a positive thing.

Crate train your dog. When properly introduced, a crate (or indoor kennel) can become a great ‘safe space’ for your dog that allows you to separate them from children, but at the same time keeps them in the same room as you. As dogs are social creatures they will often choose to stay with their family even if they feel a bit overwhelmed. Therefore, crates are a fantastic option in this situation, as you can safely pop them in there, so they are still near to you and don’t feel excluded. Invest in a stairgate to segregate certain areas of the home. Let your dog sleep undisturbed. Puppies in particular need a lot of sleep and being startled or woken regularly may begin to affect your dog’s behaviour, and they may become irritable or defensive.

If either your dog or the visiting child is having one of those days (too excitable, easily frustrated or just a bit boisterous!), then management is the key to avoiding accidents. Use your stair gate or dog crate and keep your puppy safely occupied with a tasty chew or stuffed toy.

Dog’s body language

We often hear that dog attacks came out of nowhere, or that the dog didn’t give any signal they were about to bite, but this could be because not many people recognise the signs dogs give us before they bite. Dogs will typically try to avoid biting people but will do so as a last resort to make something they perceive to be scary stop or go away. Before dog’s bite, they will usually exhaust a wide range of signals or warnings with the intention of avoiding conflict. If the visiting child(ren) is old enough get them to talk about how they would feel in different situations and how they might act. This will help them to understand what a dog might be trying to tell us and help encourage them to act safely and calmly around them.

Signs that your dog or puppy is feeling worried include,

avoidance, moving away, hiding

tail tucked under, looking away, appearing ‘smaller’

lip licking, yawning (when not sleepy), paw raising

growling, flashing teeth, snapping, biting

A good separation routine will help avoid your dog getting to this situation, but if your dog shows any of these behaviours, they are telling you they are uncomfortable, it is time to remove them from the situation that is making them worried. Now is the time for a time out between dog and child. Move your dog to a separate area away from the child and give them something nice to focus on, such as a favourite chew or stuffed toy. This is the safest way to avoid a situation escalating into a bite incident.

Are some breeds of dog safer with children than others?

There is no scientific evidence to suggest that any breed of dog is naturally more aggressive than any other breed of dog. However, because of the difference in size between larger breeds of dog and children, a bite by a larger dog is likely to cause a more significant injury to a child than a bite from a smaller dog. Bites from even very small breeds can cause life-threatening injuries to babies and toddlers.

Because of the heights of children and dogs, children are more likely to be bitten on the head and face area (76 per cent bites to lips, nose, or cheeks), and therefore suffer more serious, life changing injuries than adults who are bitten. Incidents of fatal dog bites are on children in the UK are rare, and have involved a range of breeds and types, both large and small. Non-fatal bites also involve many different types of dogs. While acknowledging typical breed tendencies is useful when thinking about how a dog may behave, focussing solely on breed alone (including whether the dog is a legal type) is unhelpful when it comes to deciding on risk, all dogs have teeth and all dogs have the potential to bite. Assessing the situation based on the individual dog’s behaviour and separating the dog and child when needed is the best way to keep everyone safe.

When the child(ren) and dog are together, you must actively supervise. Better relationships are built by trust, boundaries and positive interactions.

Dogs and children’s health.

Give your dog a regular worming treatment and ensure you clear away their poo from the garden quickly.

Teaching the visiting child(ren) a good hygiene routine which includes washing hands after stroking your dog or before eating is a good idea. Younger children often put things in their mouths and so are more likely to suffer from diseases such as toxocariasis, which is contracted when people eat the eggs of roundworms found in the faeces of un-wormed dogs, cats and foxes, or contaminated soil. In rare cases toxocariasis can cause blindness, seizures or breathing difficulties.

Being safe around dogs.

There are over twenty-one million dogs in the UK, many of them are bought for companionship and as family pets. It is important that children understand how to behave around the dogs in their homes, and community so they can enjoy their company and remain safe. There are many benefits of having a dog in the family. Children with pets have better self-esteem, empathy, and social skills. They provide loyalty. There is a reduction of incidence of allergies and asthma when the baby has a cat or dog in the home in their first year of life. The children should also have a better immune system.

Petting a dog or cat can reduce anxiety and owning a pet can aid relaxation. Dog owners tend to have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels. They also suffer from fewer medical problems generally. Walking your dog and caring for them is good exercise. Children can learn about responsibility, compassion and respect for another living thing.

Even if used to children in the past, a new dog will not be used to yours, and will need time to get to know them. Help prevent your dog feeling overwhelmed, allow the dog to settle, the dog will come to the children, rather than the other way round. This prevents feelings of being under threat and your dog is less likely to be defensive.

Children can encourage the dog to come to them by sitting down and offering a treat or a game with a toy. Ask them not to stare as this can be threatening. If the dog goes to them, they can stroke the dog gently underneath the animal’s chin to begin with, patting on the head is really something no one should do, dogs are not a fan of being patted on the head. Children should not come face to face with your dog it can be quite frightening, so be prepared to move the dog away if the dog becomes overwhelmed or if is about to jump up. Dogs do not always appreciate being hugged or cuddled unless familiar with it from an early age. It is a great temptation for children to do this, especially if they have been used to doing it to a previous dog. You will need to slowly find out what your new dog will accept, supervising constantly to ensure no unacceptable behaviour occurs on either side.

After the initial introduction, ask the children to give the dog a bit of space and time to find its feet. A new game for the children, introduced at the same time as the new dog, can distract their attention for a while and enable the first few days to go more smoothly. If your children have not owned a dog before, they may need to be taught to respect the animal and not treat their companion as a toy. High-pitched squeals can upset a dog until used to them, so try to keep play as calm as possible.

Some dogs, such as collies, have a strong herding instinct and may nip at children’s ankles, causing them to squeal and run away. This excites the dog, encouraging more of the same, so this type of behaviour must be stopped at once or it can become a habit. Children have to learn not to tease or bully the dog, and the dog has to learn not to jump up at the children, be too boisterous or nip them in play. It is important to supervise all their activities until both parties have learned the rules. It is not advisable to leave children under the age of fifteen alone with any dog.

Be especially careful with older dogs and children. A dog with impaired vision or hearing may be startled by sudden approaches. Explain the difficulties the dog is having to the children, so they learn to approach more gently.

Introducing to other dogs

It is best to introduce dogs on neutral territory so take both dogs out for a long walk together. The interest of the walk will make the introduction less intense, and they can get to know each other as they walk. If you need to use a car to take them home, keep them separated until you arrive. When you arrive home, take them into the garden, allowing the new dog to go in first and let them run around together for a few minutes. Before allowing them into the house, remove anything they are likely to fight over, such as toys or bones. Attention from members of the family may also be a resource to fight over, so ignore both dogs until they have settled down. Try to ignore any small disagreements and scuffles. If you see both dogs stiffening up and staring at each other, distract them by pretending something more interesting is going on elsewhere. Be ready to lead the dogs away and isolate each of them until they have calmed down. Extra care should be taken when introducing a large dog to a small one since the damage inflicted during a fight can be much worse for the smaller dog. Usually, introductions go smoothly, and the new dog is treated, and acts, like a visitor. The relationship between them is sorted out during the first few weeks and disagreements are possible during this time. Try to avoid situations that may cause aggravation. Feed them apart until they are used to each other, separate them before answering the door and do not make such a fuss of the new dog that your old dog feels excluded. Care should be taken not to leave them alone together until it is obvious that they have become friends. Introducing your existing dog and new puppy in the right way will help set their relationship on the right path. Remove toys and food, before bringing your puppy home put all toys and food out of reach to avoid potential conflicts. You want your puppy and adult dog’s first meeting to be a positive experience. Feed in the same room but giving space to your older dog. Never allow your new puppy to venture near the older dog’s food, dogs can get possessive over the food bowl.

Introducing dogs to cats.

Even if your dog has previously lived with a cat, new cats may not necessarily be tolerated. If they are to become friends, it is essential the dog is not allowed to frighten the cat. This means having the dog on a lead and under control when they are introduced. Let the cat have the freedom to get out of the way or approach if your dog wishes. The cat will probably need time to assess the dog. For this reason, supervise all their encounters for several weeks to ensure a successful outcome. Do not allow the dog to give chase at any time since this will upset the relationship and it will be much longer before they become used to each other. Care should be taken not to leave a cat and a dog alone together until it is obvious that they have become friends. Extra care when introducing kittens

Kittens are far more vulnerable due their size, they are usually more playful and active than an adult cat, they are more likely to excite a dog. If you are introducing a kitten to a dog, a stair gate won’t be practical as they will easily be able to slip through the bars, so for safety reasons the initial introduction is best carried out by placing the kitten in a crate. The dog crate should be large enough for a litter tray, a scratching post, bed and places to hide. Allow the kitten to get used to being in the crate prior to meeting the dog, by placing the crate in the area you have chosen away from the dog, so they get used to going in and out. Pop a blanket over one side which will help the kitten feel safe.

The importance of scent

For both cats and dogs, smell is extremely important for communication. You can integrate the new pet into your home more successfully by making sure that they smell of ’home’ before being introduced. You can start this process even before you bring your new pet home by exchanging bedding between the pets if this is possible. This way, they get to know a bit about each other, even before they meet. Stroke each pet without washing your hands to mix scents and exchange bedding regularly. Also gather scents from the new pet’s head by gently stroking with a soft cloth and dabbing this around your home and furniture to mix with your existing pet’s scent. For this reason, it is useful to delay the pets from meeting for a few days or even a week. If you have bought in a new cat, let them explore the rest of the house when your dog is out of the house for a few hours. Cat or kittens first meeting, where this takes place will depend upon the lay out of your house. But ensure that the cat has an easy route back to their ‘safe area’. If your dog gets excited easily, then first introductions are best carried out after exercise, when your dog is likely to be calm. One of the most important rules of introducing cats and dogs is to make sure that the dog is prevented from chasing the cat. Even if your dog does not want to hurt your cat, your cat will feel threatened and unlikely to want to be anywhere near your dog in future! Once a dog develops a habit of chasing, it can be difficult to stop them, so it is best to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Put your dog on a lead behind a stair gate and have some tasty treats at the ready to reward them for calm and relaxed behaviour. Allow your cat to see your dog and approach if they want to. Most cats like to spend time ‘watching’ and will take their time to decide whether is safe to approach or not. It’s important that they are allowed to do this in their own time, so avoid bringing your cat closer yourself, you may get seriously scratched or bitten if they panic.

Your dog is likely to show some interest at this stage and what they do will depend on the individual. If they become overly excited and begin to bark, then you may need to use some food to distract them at first or move them further away. Looking at the cat for short periods is absolutely fine, but if they stare for too long, use food to interrupt. Don’t forget to praise and treat your dog for behaving well. If you are introducing a kitten in a crate, make sure that there is plenty of distance between them and take care not to overwhelm either pet. Remember that the kitten won’t have as many escape options available, so take care not to overwhelm them by keeping your dog at a distance at first. Keep these initial interactions short at first and try to end on a positive note. If either your cat or dog appears frightened, go back a few steps and keep them apart for a while longer. Continue scent swapping regularly and try again the next day. If you keep these controlled, short meetings up regularly you should see an increase in the cat’s confidence and a reduction in the dog’s excitement. As they become more familiar with each other, but if you don’t, and are concerned about either pet’s safety, then it’s important to seek professional help. Find a reputable behaviourist or trainer local to you. If your cat or dog was rehomed from a rescue centre contact them, they will do their best to help you.

Maintaining good relations

As things progress in the right direction, you can allow the cat and dog to interact more freely, but until you are sure they have become good friends, keep your dog on a ‘houseline’ to prevent any chasing. This is a lightweight lead without a handle, designed to trail behind your dog without your dog really noticing, yet allowing you to take control should you need to (if you think your dog may be getting too excitable, you can step on the line or pick it up). Breeds that like to chase, such as terriers or greyhounds, may need to be kept well under control until they have learnt that the cat is not to be chased. Take extra care with young energetic dogs who are easily excited, you may need to work hard to keep things calm and be aware that a sudden dash from the cat might trigger a chase.

If all goes well and both pets are comfortable with each other, you can progress to removing the houseline, but make sure you are there to manage the situation carefully and ensure there are high places that your cat can use to feel safe. Never leave the dog and cat together unattended until you are happy that they are safe together. Cat food is hugely tempting for any dog, so keep it well out of the way. Likewise, a litter tray can be pretty tempting too, and should be kept out of your dog’s reach. Cats need to toilet in private and if your dog can access the litter tray easily or pester your cat while toileting, your cat is likely to become distressed and may even resort to toileting elsewhere in the house. Remember that all pets are very different, and you’ll have to work at the pace that they are comfortable with. Some introductions will progress quickly without a hitch, but others may take several months. It’s important not to rush things, take things slowly and carefully, and this will hopefully result in your cat and dog living together peacefully or even becoming the best of friends.