



## Should We Get a Dog? One Time When the Answer Should be “No”

If your child is afraid of dogs, work on that fear first, before adding a dog to your household.

Parents are often told that getting a puppy and raising it with the child will help the child get over her fear of dogs. That’s not always true. Puppies are boisterous and nippy. If your child is already worried about dogs, she really won’t like having 22 pounds of fluff launch itself at her.

Start by introducing older, calm dogs to your child. Respect her fear and work at her own pace. Talk with her about the dogs you see. Learn about dog body language so that you can interpret for her what the dogs are communicating. You may want to start with books or videos first. Then have her watch (from a spot where she feels safe) as you and/or other kids interact with a dog.

Most children will reach out and touch a calm dog’s haunches if the owner turns the dog’s head away from the child. That’s an excellent first step. Talk with your child about how the dog’s fur feels. Ask her if she thinks other dogs’ fur would be softer or rougher. Get her thinking about that one dog as an individual.

Work toward having her give the dog cues (with dog’s owner ensuring that the dog complies). Seeing a dog respond correctly to what she asks will help her feel safer.

It’s best for her to work steadily with one dog until she feels very comfortable before adding another. Once she has met and likes three calm, adult dogs, begin thinking about introducing her to a puppy.

Let her start out at a distance, simply observing the puppy’s behavior. Talk with her about the ways in which the puppy is similar to and different from the adult dogs she’s met. When she is ready, let her approach the puppy. Be sure that adults are there to prevent the puppy from jumping on her; that would set your progress back considerably. Give her treats that she can toss away from herself for the puppy to eat.

If she’s ready, teach her how to lure the puppy into a sit. First, show her how holding a treat in your hand and moving it just barely higher than the puppy’s nose in the direction of his tail will cause the puppy to lift his head up and put his haunches down. Do it a few times so she can watch you. Then have her put a treat in her fist and wrap your hand around hers and lure the puppy into a sit. (Still have an adult there to prevent jumping.)

Take it slow. It’s much better to teach your child to be a skilled observer of animal behavior than it is for her to be thrown into situations that frighten her.

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