



FEARFULNESS AROUND KIDS

Why is my dog afraid of children?

From a dog's perspective, kids don't look or smell the same as their adult counterparts. Their voices are also very different. They're usually higher in pitch and volume than adults'. Kids move differently too, often in quick and unpredictable motions. It's not surprising that many dogs are afraid of them—especially dogs who haven't been well socialized to kids when they were young puppies. Previous frightening or unpleasant experiences with kids may also cause dogs to develop fear and anxiety when around them.

How can I tell when my dog's afraid?

If your dog is afraid of children, you may notice any or all of the following behaviors when your dog encounters them, at close-range or at a distance:

- attempting to flee or hide
- cowering, shaking or rolling over
- freezing or shutting down when approached by kids
- staring and/or lowering of head
- growling and/or lip-lifting (showing teeth)
- barking and/or lunging
- snapping and/or biting (these usually occur when a dog feels trapped or is unable to get away from what's scaring him)

All of the above behaviors indicate extreme stress, and if you notice any of them when you and your dog are around children, immediately and calmly remove your dog from the situation. Sometimes canine body language can be very subtle, so if your dog has shown signs of fear around kids in the past, you'll need to watch him very closely whenever children are around to avoid unexpected reactions.

What can I do to help my dog with his fear of kids?

Living with a dog who is afraid of kids can be challenging and requires a lot of diligence and patience on your part. But if you are careful to consistently protect your dog from stressful exposure to children, you can successfully manage this problem.

Management

Avoid putting your dog in situations that make him feel threatened. If kids visit your home, give your dog something tasty to chew on and put him in another part of the house. If you're going somewhere and you know that you'll see children there (like a parade or a street fair), leave your dog at home. (He'll be much happier.)

When out and about with your dog, you will need to watch him very closely in **all** situations where he may encounter children. If you and your dog run into one or more kids *unexpectedly*, stay calm. If you suddenly seem nervous, your dog will definitely notice and become nervous too. Use treats and a gentle voice to lead your dog away from the area. **DO NOT** let children approach your dog if he seems fearful or shows any signs of stress (see list above).

Behavior Modification

First and foremost, avoid any kind of coercive training techniques. "Correcting," punishing or even yelling at your dog if he barks or growls at children will almost certainly worsen the problem. (Your dog will learn that he has a NEW reason to fear kids, since every time they show up, *you* suddenly get upset and angry!) The proper way to address your dog's fearful behavior around kids involves the use of a desensitization and counterconditioning program. By exposing your dog to kids at a distance that does not make him nervous or frightened (possibly a *great* distance at first), and teaching him that whenever he sees or hears kids, you start doling out extremely tasty treats, you can help your dog learn that kids aren't as scary as he thought. They make delicious goodies happen!

Helpful Resources & Recommended Reading

An experienced professional dog trainer can guide you through a well-planned training program to modify your dog's fearful behavior around children. Call our **Behavior Helpline** if you'd like a referral to a local trainer who can help, or if you need additional advice: **(804) 643-SPCA**.

For detailed, well-written information about helping your dog, we recommend purchasing Patricia McConnell's *Cautious Canine*, which you can find in our SPCA gift shop.