

Kids and Dogs. A lesson in canine body language!



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As a dog behaviourist, I get sent cute photos and video clips of kids and dogs almost every day of my working life!

Here are just a few.



The chances are that when you look at these pictures, just like most other people, you say “Ahhh!” – you see the cute interaction between child and dog. However, for each and every one of these images, I say, “Yikes!” because I see a dog that is clearly sending out warning messages that it’s not happy being in close proximity to a child – and we need to heed those warnings if we are to keep everyone in the family safe.

In order for this to happen, there are three things that you need to know!

1. Dogs can’t speak English! They can’t write you an angry email or pop a post-it note on the front of the fridge door. This means that if they feel uncomfortable around your child (or any child), the only way they can express it is through body language and facial expression.

2. Dogs are subtle communicators. This is important because most humans only notice when a dog is unhappy at the point of aggression. But it didn’t start like that. Instead, I can guarantee that early on the dog sent multiple clues that said, “I’m a dog, get me out of here,” but because these weren’t noticed, he had to escalate his signalling and his behaviour.

3. Kids are scary for many dogs, and puppies. Sorry, but that’s just the way it is. Kids don’t sound like adult humans. They move in erratic ways, do unpredictable things, and represent a social ‘risk’ that many dogs are fearful of. I think that for most dogs, kids under the age of about eight are viewed as other dogs – to be played with like a canine companion – and disciplined in the same way too. Over the age of eight and they are simply unfathomable small humans that break all the rules of canine etiquette.

It’s not all bad news though! As someone who loves dogs and can’t think of a life without owning (at least!) one dog, it’s all about good communication.

If you can learn to spot when your dog is comfortable, or uncomfortable, you can help him – and your children – to build healthy coping strategies so that aggression is never needed. In other words, if you listen to the whispers, the shouting becomes unnecessary.

So, how do dogs tell us that they are unhappy or stressed in a situation long before they show their teeth?

- Stress yawns
- Stress panting and elongated tongue
- White of the eye
- Turning the head away
- Lip licking
- Leaning away
- Lowered body or head
- Tail down between the legs or wagging fast and low

So, with this in mind, let’s look at these pictures again...

Although some canine facial expressions are very different from ours, others are remarkably similar – from ‘gut instinct’ I’m sure that you can tell this dog looks worried, and she is!

Notice the dog’s ears right back, body leaning away from the baby, eye brows pulled together into a frown of concern. Her facial muscles are also tense, with her lips pulled back into an ‘appeasement’ grin.

This is a dog that wants to avoid confrontation, but if she’s cornered then she may not be able to use ‘flight’ as an option.



This dog’s not so obviously unhappy, but the dog’s lips are pulled back and the tongue is ‘long’. While this expression might be because the dog is hot, the more likely explanation is that the dog is slightly stressed by the child’s physical proximity.



Once again, this dog has an elongated’ tongue and pulled back lips as he’s stress panting. His facial muscles are tight – you can tell this from the ‘ridge’ under his eye.

He’s also turning his head away from the child on the right of the picture – this says, “I feel concerned and want to try and switch off the threat.”





This photo, and the one below, show that even very young puppies understand the 'rules' of social etiquette with people – and that they are uncomfortable because the kids haven't read the same manual!

This puppy's face and muzzle is tense – he's holding his breath and turning his face away from the child's touch. This says, "No thanks."



This pup and little boy look very cute together, but even at this age the puppy understands that close, direct eye contact is slightly threatening, and is giving a stress yawn in response.

It's not scary, but if this was my son and my dog I would want to notice and respond by giving the puppy more space in this situation.

While I've got no doubt that none of the children (or dogs!) were harmed in the making of these photos, the reality is that they are all showing signs of discomfort that could easily escalate if the dogs in question can't move away (or choose not to).

Here are some different images – in these pictures the dogs look calm and relaxed because they are simply hanging out alongside the kids, or they are engaged in positive and constructive interaction with the children, or being supervised by adults.



Dogs can bring children a huge sense of belonging, of non-judgmental support, loyalty, stability and unconditional love. The relationship between children and dogs can be a wonderful one. But it's up to us to make sure that dogs and kids really are best friends.