

## CARE SHEET

Developed with and approved by a Qualified Veterinarian

The relationship between a dog and a child can be magical, but it's not automatic. Prevent upsetting or tragic situations by teaching your children and your dog how to behave together.

**How Dogs Think** Dogs are pack animals, meaning they live in a group with a strict social structure. When a dog joins your household, he needs to learn his position within your family "pack." He is always testing to see if he can move up in rank. For safety and comfort, everyone in the family needs to be higher in the pack order than the dog.

Pack leaders eat first and walk ahead of other pack members. Pack leaders defend the pack and make the rules. The leader, or alpha dog, disciplines the lower pack members by nipping or growling to remind them he is in charge. A dog that knows his pack has a strong leader and is secure in his position in the pack feels secure, accepts the pack rules, and lives happily. Children often have a more difficult time establishing and holding their position in the pack, at least in the dog's eyes. A dog is often eye level with a toddler, and this can be frightening to both him and the child. Or, he may view the child as a littermate, equal to him in height and social position. He may feel he has the right to discipline the child when he or she tries to take his food or toy, or plays too rough. Training both the dog and the child is essential to ensure safety and happiness.

**Children and the Family Dog** Teach your children to respect the dog and realize that he is not a stuffed toy. He is a live animal that feels pain when hurt, has emotions, and has physical needs that must be met. Kids may unknowingly tease a dog by waving a toy around and snatching it away. Hitting with a stick or pinching an ear may cause a dog to snap, even though the child didn't intend to hurt. As a rule of thumb, don't allow children to do to a dog what you would not allow done to a toddler.

At the same time, the dog must learn his manners and not play too rough, put his mouth on an arm, jump up, or knock kids over. Avoid games of tug of war and keep-away. Good games for children and dogs are fetch, learning tricks, practicing obedience.

Put the dog in his crate for a short while if he starts to get out of control. Protect the dog from children who do not treat him gently or follow your rules. He should be allowed some time out to rest when he has had enough. Make sure that children understand that the crate is his private area. Do not allow children to play in or on your dog's crate, and never allow a child to crawl into the crate with the dog. This could cause the dog to feel trapped, and snap out of fear.

Teach children to always speak to a sleeping dog before touching him. He might bite to defend himself before he realizes who you are.

Children can help feed and clean up, but don't expect them to take sole responsibility for the dog's care. Dogs are family pets, and everyone should be involved in his care.

**Children and New Dogs** Establish the house rules and enforce them from the day your new dog or puppy arrives. Be sure the entire family is consistent and uses the same rules (PETCO offers Care Sheets regarding this topic). Eventually, even little kids should be able to give obedience commands and have the dog obey. **A small child should never be left alone with any dog.** Allow them to get used to each other from across the room or yard. Your children may act differently than other children have acted with them. Allow him to keep his distance until he is comfortable rather than letting kids corner him or force him to be petted or hugged.

If you are going to have a toddler in your life, prepare your dog now. When children are not present, take some treats and practice handling your dog. Gently hold your dog's tail for a moment, then as you release praise and give the dog treat. Hold a paw or an ear the same way. This way the dog will associate such actions with good things.

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### Children and New Dogs

Don't relax your supervision because things are going well. Your new pet will go through a adjustment period of several weeks. He will be on his best behavior while he tries to figure out the rules. Once he settles in, he may get tired of a child's poking or pulling, and might nip to discipline. This is the way a dog would discipline another dog that has gotten too pushy. It is natural canine behavior, but unacceptable in a human family. In situations like this, the dog always loses, often being given up at the nearest shelter.

Be careful not to make your children jealous by giving the new dog too much time and attention. They may retaliate by punishing the dog when you're not there.

### Children and Unknown Dogs

The majority of dogs are friendly, wanting petting and interaction. But not all dogs are friendly, and it's important for your child's safety to know what they should do when encountering a dog of unknown temperament.

Prepare your children for an encounter with a strange dog. Talk about and act out different situations. Teach your children how to approach and pet a dog. Use a stuffed toy and guide their hands at first.

#### **Introduce yourself to owner and dog:**

When they meet a dog they don't know, have them ask the owner, "May I please pet your dog?" If the owner says yes, it is often better to scratch the dog's chest rather than patting the top of his head.

If a dog seems afraid or backs away, leave him alone. Let him approach you, and don't force him to be petted. Don't allow kids to put their face right in front of any dog's face. Never try to kiss a dog!

#### **Know what an angry dog looks like:**

Barking, growling, snarling with teeth showing, ears laid flat, legs stiff, tail up, and hair standing up on its back. When you see a dog like this, keep your hands in your pockets and slowly walk away sideways. Don't look in the dog's eyes, and don't run. Screaming and waving your arms around (a natural response for a child) will cause the dog to chase. If a dog attacks, curl up in a ball on the ground and protect your face with your hands.

#### **Know when to stay away:**

Keep a safe distance from a dog that is eating or chewing on a bone. Some dogs will snap if you get too close because they are afraid you will take their food away.

Don't go near a mother dog with puppies. She will try to protect them from strangers, and even a normally friendly dog could bite.

Stay away from a dog that is chained or in a fenced yard. The dog may bite to protect himself because he can't get away. He doesn't know you won't hurt him. Don't shout, run around, or reach at dogs through open fences or windows.

Never try to break up a dogfight. Teach your children to stay away from the fight and find an adult to help.

#### **Know what to do when bitten:**

If bitten, your child needs to tell an adult right away. Try to remember what the dog looked like, if it had a collar on, and where it went. Wash the wound with soap and water. Take your child to a doctor. Bite wounds easily get infected.

**Note:** The information on this Care Sheet is not a substitute for veterinary care. If you need additional information, please refer to the above sources or contact your veterinarian as appropriate.