

Dogs and young children

Living together in harmony

All you need to know to deal safely with dogs



Information booklet for young children from age 3



**BARK & SMILE
PROGRAMME**

Dear Teachers!

The aim of this booklet is to provide basic, practical information and suggestions on how to look after a pet dog to ensure that children and dogs can live in harmony together. By using the advice and knowledge contained in this booklet, we hope that children will learn to understand why it is important to care for their pets responsibly and thereby reduce the risk of receiving a dog bite.

This education programme was tested in Hungary in April 2008 by providing this booklet to every junior school in the country as a part of a national campaign to help younger children learn how to interact safely with dogs.

Why is it important to teach young children about dogs?

The most common victims of dog bites and attacks are younger children, particularly those between the ages of one and six years. We know that dogs can be confused by the erratic, unpredictable behaviour of younger children (e.g. their fast movements and loud noises). We also know that younger children tend to misunderstand animal behaviour as they usually have not been taught to read a dog's body language. It is also clear that younger children are less able to protect themselves physically.

Due to young children's shorter height and comparative body size, if a child is, unfortunately, bitten by a dog, there is a tendency for the bite marks to occur on the face, head and neck. As a child's skin is softer and more delicate, these wounds can be very serious.

Children under five years of age mainly fall victim to dog bites in the home whereas older children tend to be bitten outside of the home in more public places. Unfortunately, most parents are not aware that they should never leave a child alone with a dog.

The aim of our education programme is to help children avoid dog attacks as well as reducing the number of children receiving dog bites. After all, we know that many dog attacks are due to a lack of knowledge and a lack of care. Help us give children the information they need!

This programme, "Living together in harmony", helps children acquire the basic rules in a fun way, to encourage them to learn about responsibility. Many European companies and public organisations support this programme and are committed to raising awareness of this issue. We believe that by influencing children's attitudes and behaviour we will see a reduction in the number of dog bites and attacks on young children.

How to use this booklet:

This information booklet includes general information for children between the ages of three and six years old.

The chapters are inter-connected but they can also be used separately. Each section is illustrated with pictures, which can be enlarged, or the teacher can hand out the booklet to the class. Children are usually interested in animal-related topics, particularly about dogs. Experience-based education can be a useful learning tool and therefore we suggest creating a lesson where the children share stories about their own experiences of interacting with pets with the participation of the teacher. It may also help if the lesson coincides with an animal-related event (e.g.: National Pet Week), and if relevant poems, songs and stories are used, supported by drawings and discussion. The information should be adapted to the children's age, their knowledge, and their experience with pets. It is our aim to provide the essential information on how to be a responsible pet owner and how young children can avoid dangerous situations.

We wish you a fun, informative time!



Thomas Meyer
Secretary General
FEDIAF



7 essential rules to be a responsible pet owner



Responsibility: A pet should only be adopted if you are fully aware of the responsibility, the duties and the costs involved. A responsible pet owner should consider whether he can provide the right home, health and nutritional care for the animal – not just now, but for the whole of the pet's life. To quote Antoine de Saint-Exupery's fox: "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed."



Love: "Buy a pup and your money will buy love unflinching that cannot lie--," said Rudyard Kipling. However, this love should be reciprocal: We should offer our beloved pet at least as much love as we expect from him. Never take out your bad mood on your pet as they are not to blame and they will never understand this behaviour. Animals are used for healing and rehabilitation purposes in several countries, and there are many programmes where pet owners take their dogs to visit sick children or elderly people living in nursing homes to help them feel better.



Nutrition: "Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food," said Hippocrates, the Ancient Greek physician. This is true: no medicine helps to avoid illness as effectively as appropriate, complete and balanced nutrition. Just think how awful it would be to feel hunger or thirst when you don't have access to food or drink. Good nutrition is just as important for our pets. They need their own prepared pet food at a set time every day. By providing your pet with food specifically produced to meet his needs means that you are giving him the best opportunity for a long, healthy and happy life. Always make sure that your dog has at least one bowl of fresh, clean drinking water available at all times; pets suffer from thirst, too.



The need for exercise: Don't have a dog unless you have enough time to take him for regular walks. Exercise is important; it allows a dog to go outside to go to the toilet as well as being vital for his health and wellbeing. Movement is essential for dogs. The exercise needed for each type/breed of dog will vary according to his size and what he was originally bred to do; it will also depend on the dog's age and lifestyle (whether he has access to a garden etc.). It's not just dogs that need exercise – all pets (hamsters, birds, fish, reptiles etc.) need to move their bodies and release energy, and they must be provided with an appropriate lifestyle. Remember: regular walks are not only essential for the dog but also useful for the owner!



Health: We need to protect our pets from dangerous diseases and ensure they are protected with the right vaccinations. Don't forget that animals can also become very ill without complaining, so be alert to any changes you notice in your pet and speak to or visit your vet if you have any worries. Also make sure that you bring your pet to your veterinarian for an annual check-up every year, as this is an opportunity to detect early problems. We also must make sure we regularly de-worm, de-flea and groom our pets, too. By protecting the health of our pets, we also protect our own health as some diseases and parasites can also be spread to people.



Offspring: We are responsible not only for our pets but also for their offspring. So female dogs should only be bred if we can first be sure of finding responsible owners for the puppies. If you have a male dog, don't let him stray, especially if he is not neutered. The best solution for avoiding unwanted young puppies and kittens, is to neuter all pets, so they cannot produce offspring.



A happy home: The most important element of being a responsible pet owner is that both you and your pet live together in a happy home. Creating harmony within your own environment is a part of this process. If all dog owners followed some basic rules, we'd all make it much easier for our dogs, ourselves and our families to enjoy each other's company as well as avoiding possible conflicts with our neighbours. So make the effort to create your own happy home environment!

1. Inside the dog's mind

We have had a close relationship with dogs for around 10,000 years after some wolves, a species with which man had long been in competition, found an advantage living closer to man's settlements, and then moved into his villages as a scavenger rather than a hunter. Puppies born in the village could be handled and domesticated by people and then ultimately selected to carry out certain tasks for people, such as guarding, hunting and livestock herding, and ever since then, there has been a special connection between dogs and people based on reciprocal affection, trust and understanding.

The dog's senses

Dogs living in the wild could survive by hunting, and their senses developed in order to help them. Their sight, hearing, taste and sense of smell are of great importance, although their senses are nowadays very much influenced by their breeding.

Body language

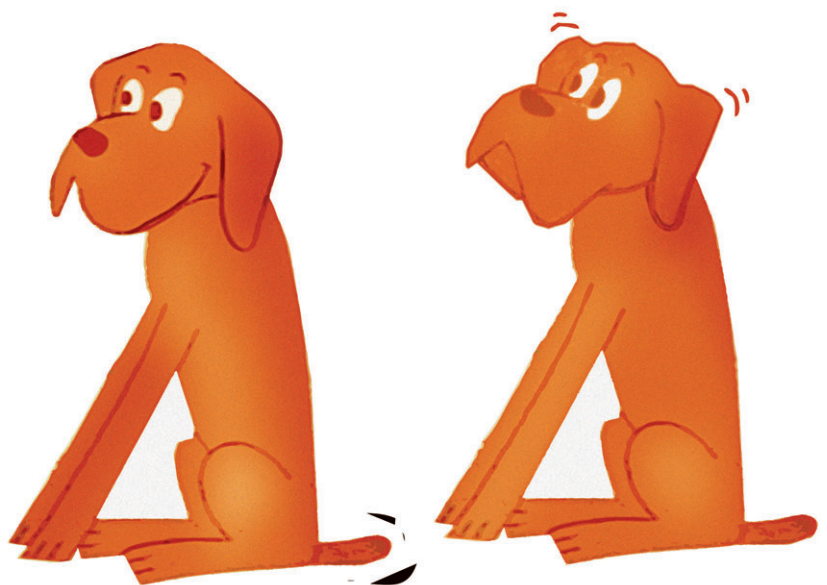
Dogs can communicate with people very well. They consider their owners a part of their family and are able to understand their intentions and mood. If an owner can understand how his dog communicates with other dogs, it can help him to evaluate his dog's reactions. There are many signs that dogs use for communication: facial expression, posture, vocalisations and smells. Dogs use their mouth, eyes, ears and tail to express their feelings.

Tip: Combine the lesson with a game where children can act like dogs to practise different canine behaviours. Which expressions do they show? (Pleasure, sadness, excitement, etc.) How did they achieve this? (By using their eyes, movement, noises etc.)

Interest

If dogs are interested in something, they give their attention by pricking up their ears or making small sniffs. The feet stiffen and the dog bows his body a little bit.

- the dog's ears go forward or upwards
- the dog watches the chosen object intently
- unless they are asked to sit, most dogs stand while watching something



Play

A dog can invite us to play in many different ways. He might bark at us, give a play-bow (where he stretches his front legs out and has his bottom high in the air) and wag his tail excitedly. He might also come up and nudge you with his nose, or look at you and bark a high-pitched yap.

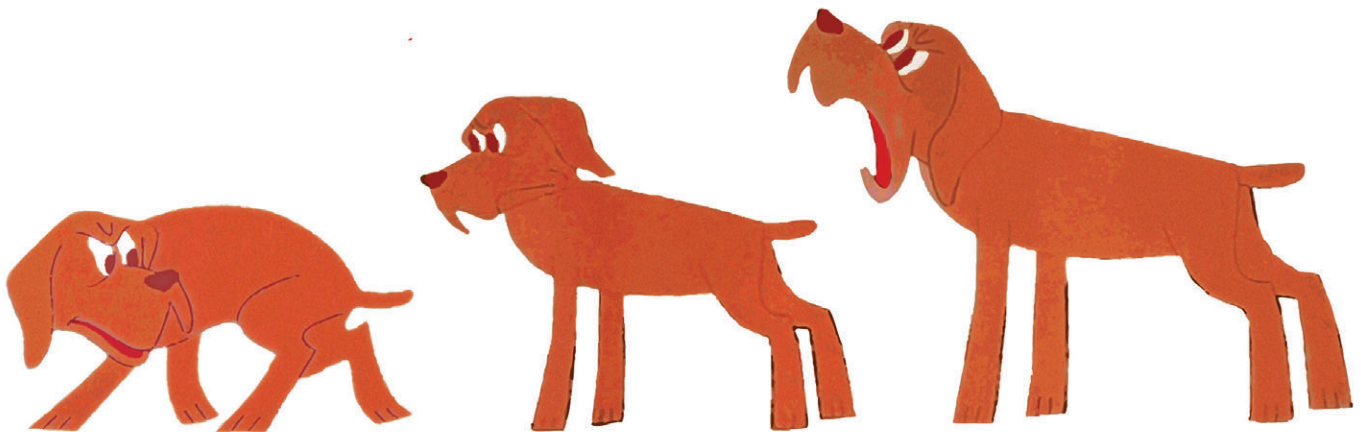
- wagging tail, playful movement
- a play-bow, a nose nudge, or a high-pitched bark
- many dogs bring their favourite toy to you



Tip: Discuss safe ways of playing with a dog (e.g. throwing a ball). Introduce well-known poems and stories about dogs to the children.

Attack

A dog that is about to attack might give a deep bark. He might bare his teeth and growl, the hair on his back (hackles) may ruffle and his muscles might stiffen. It is important to note that looking straight into a dog's eyes can be intimidating/threatening and make him believe he is in danger.



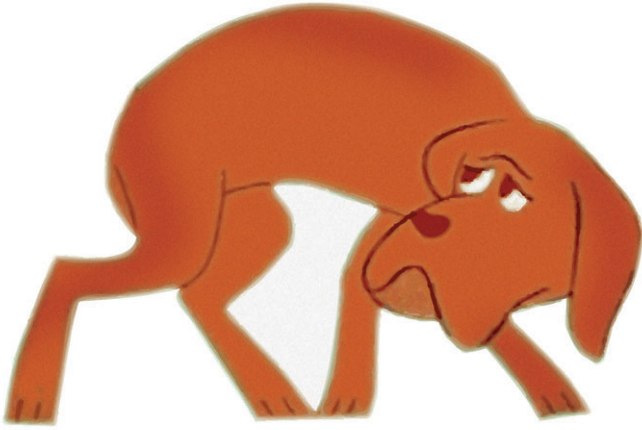
Possible reasons for attacks:

- fear (from other dogs, strangers, objects – e.g. vacuum cleaner, car, etc.)
- pain (if a dog is in pain, he might snap if touched or approached)
- guarding his territory, owner or possession (e.g. food, toy, bed)

Tip: Discuss how people act if they are angry. How do other animals express their intention to attack?

Fear

If the dog is tucking his tail under his belly, dropping his ears down, hunching his back, and standing in a 'sneaking' position with bent legs, it looks as if he's trying to make himself disappear.

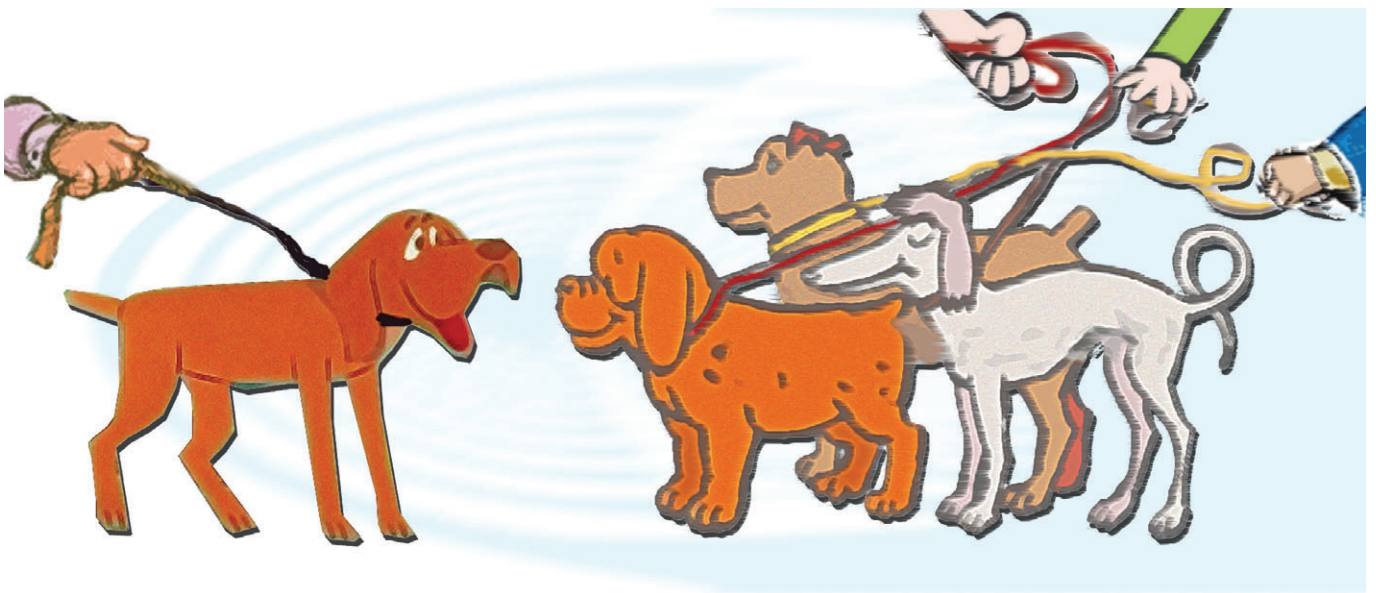


- hunched back
- tail under his belly
- trying to avoid eye contact (looking in another direction)
- head downwards

Tip: What can a dog be afraid of? What are you afraid of? How does a person look when he is afraid?

Dogs meeting each other

Dogs usually enjoy regular contact with other dogs. They sniff each other when they meet and you can tell if their relationship is friendly by the way they interact. A friendly dog will wag his tail and might try to get the other to play. A hostile dog might growl, raise his hackles, and look fierce.



Tip: What do dogs communicate when they meet? Why do they urinate against trees? Why do they smell?

2. What if...?

For young children between three and six years old a relationship with animals plays an important role in the development of their overall social empathy. If a child is able to empathise with an animal's different feelings (fear, hunger, illness or happiness), then he or she will be able to interpret and react to the animal's behaviour in an appropriate way. This is also important for teaching children how to interpret the behaviour and feelings of other children or adults.

Tip: Discuss and role-play the following scenarios...

How would you feel if you were hungry but couldn't get anything to eat?



- searching for food
- bad mood, weakness

Tip: Talk about the importance of feeding animals. Remember, a dog usually only gets something to eat if his owner gives him some food!

How would you feel if you couldn't move freely?

- bad mood
- a lot of pent-up energy
- anger
- sadness



Tip: Discuss why dogs are sometimes tied-up. Is this the only solution? What other animals are caged? Which animals couldn't live any other way? (E.g. fish in an aquarium.) How might they feel about that?

How would you feel if you couldn't escape from the sunshine or heat?

- sunstroke, weakness
- thirst
- feeling sick



Tip: Discuss how we protect ourselves from the sunshine (e.g. shade, sun-hats etc.) How can we protect our dogs?



How would you feel if you were insulted or hurt, instead of loved?

- sadness, desperation
- seeking affection
- bad mood
- pain



Tip: Discuss how to reward a dog for behaving well. What can a dog be praised and rewarded with? (E.g. stroking, playing, giving a treat.) Why should you never punish a dog?

How would you feel if you were dirty and couldn't get clean?



- grubby and under the weather
- maybe more prone to illness & disease
- itchy

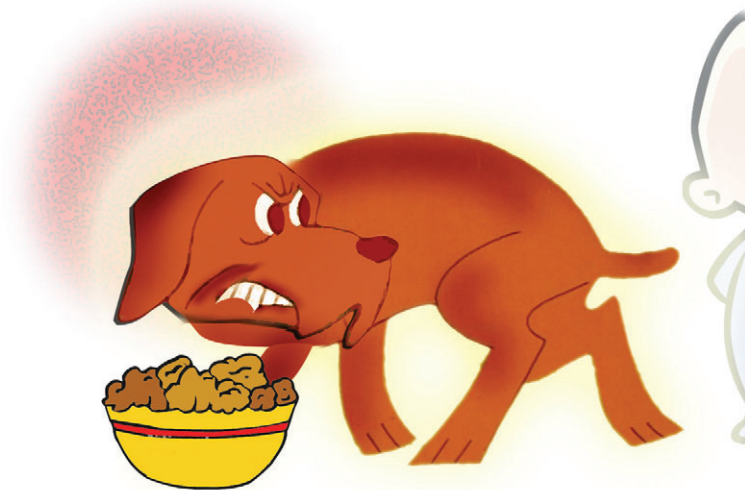
Tip: Discuss hygiene. How does a dog stay clean? How do other animals clean themselves?

3. Dangerous situations

Even well-trained, friendly dogs can be dangerous sometimes. If a dog is in pain or fights with other dogs, children or adults can get hurt if they get too close, even though they are not the target of the attack. The most common situations are described below. Sick dogs require special attention, as they can not only be dangerous but might also infect us. A sick dog usually shows the following symptoms: lack of appetite, fever, sadness, tiredness and a dull coat. A sick dog might also be in pain.

Tip: Using the pictures below, discuss situations where it might be dangerous to approach a dog.

When a dog is eating, he might protect his food.

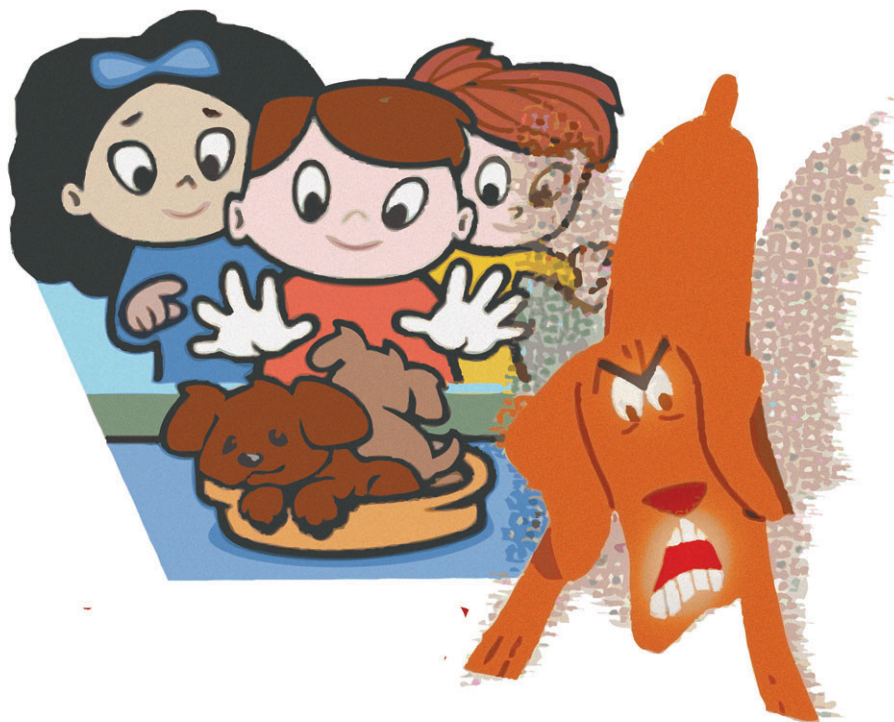


If a dog is ill and in pain, he might be more sensitive even to gentle stroking.





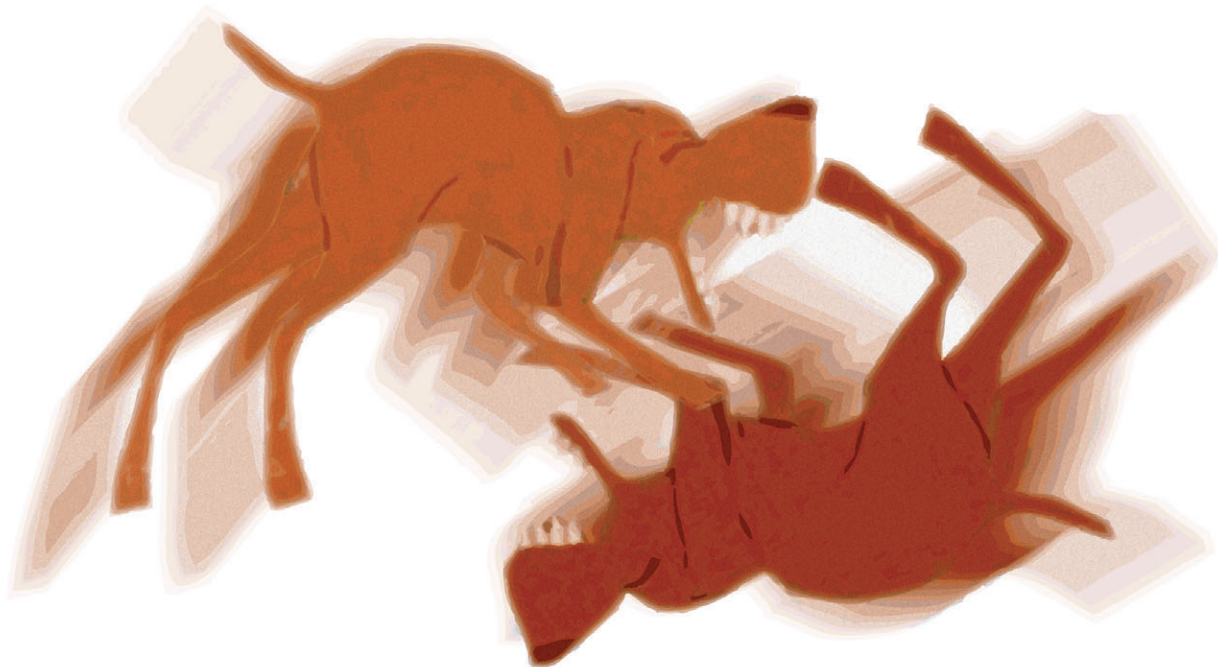
If a dog has puppies, she might protect them.



A tied-up dog may be dangerous.



Fighting dogs focus on each other and ignore everything else around them.



Dogs might cause harm while playing rough games.





Stray dogs might spread diseases.



Dogs behind a fence might protect their territory.



4. How to avoid dangerous situations

The basic golden rule regarding young children is that the dog and the child must never be left unattended and unsupervised. Also, feeding and playing with the dog should only be under adult supervision. Dangerous situations should be anticipated and avoided, to prevent injuries. Meeting a dog or living with one can be made safer by keeping to some basic rules. Although the rules are simple, they are not always easy for children to keep all the time, as youngsters like to touch and examine everything, they are often loud, and their movements are fast and unpredictable.

Tip: Discuss whether the children have ever been involved in dangerous situations with dogs. What happened and how did they behave? Why is it important to have an adult next to us when meeting a dog?

If a dog has food in his bowl, don't touch him or try to take the bowl away. Leave him alone while he is eating. This also applies to his chew toys.

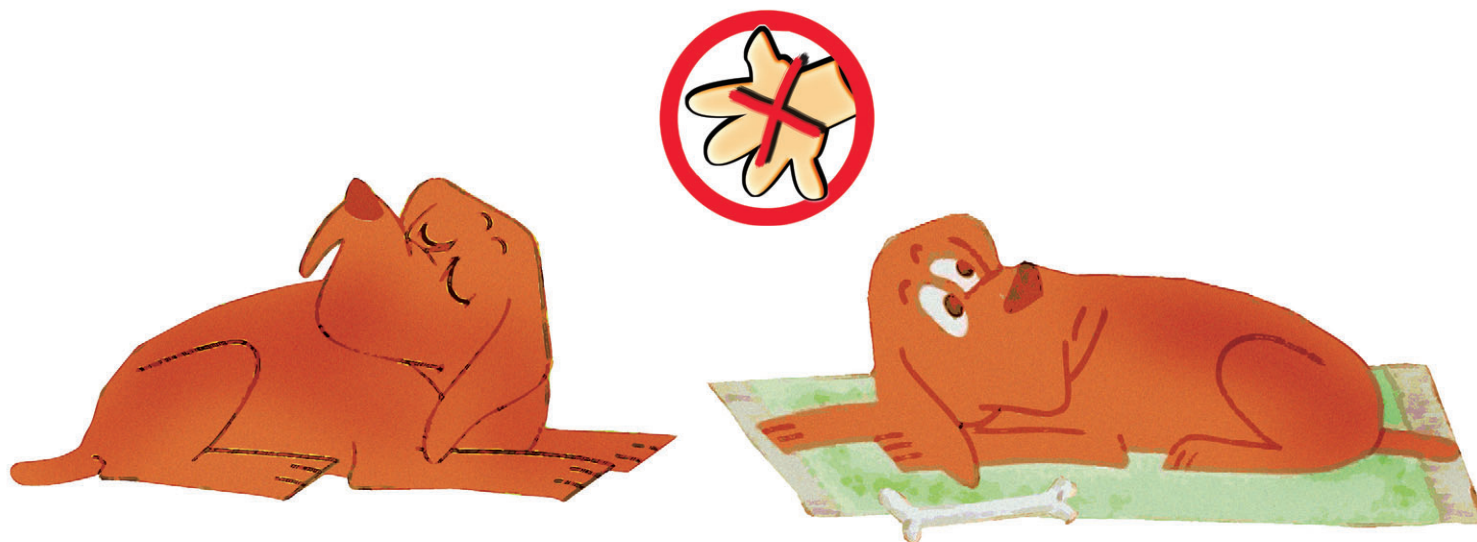


Teach him obedience. A trained dog is easier to control and is therefore less dangerous. Dogs should be trained by the whole family – including parents and older brothers and sisters. Dogs should always be rewarded during training when they do something right; punishment and aggression should be avoided.



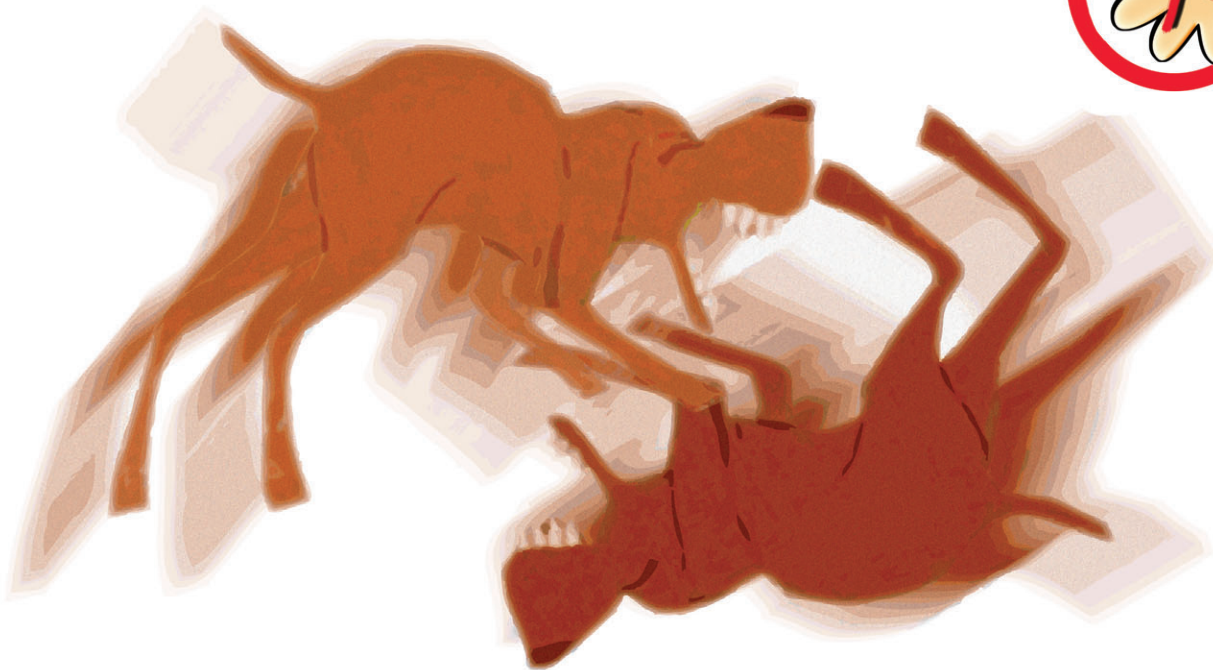


If a dog is relaxing, let him sleep; don't disturb him, call his name or touch him.

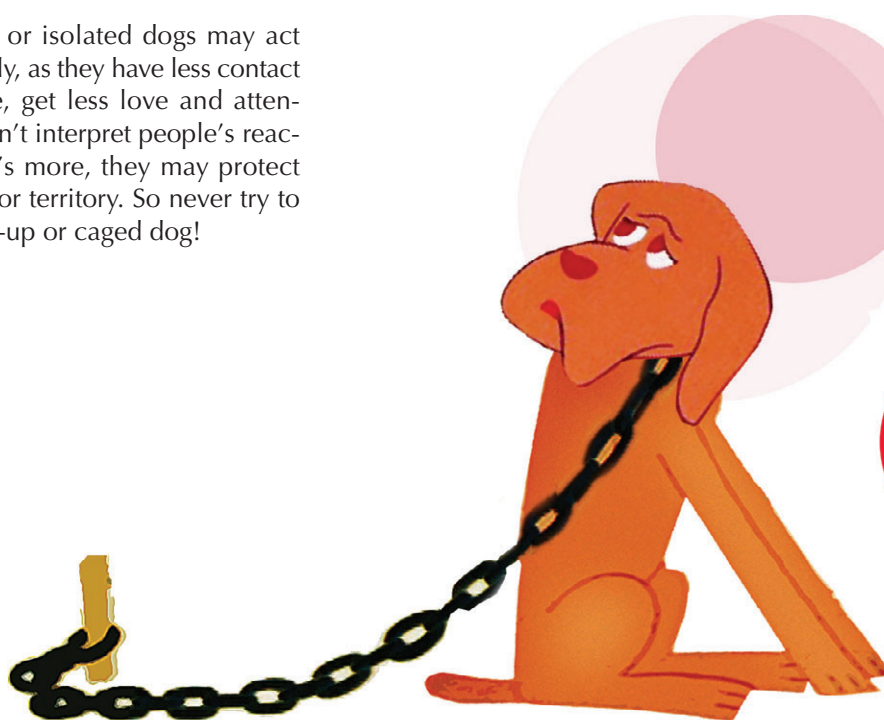


Like people, dogs also dislike sudden loud noises. They might get scared and hurt someone without meaning to.

Fighting dogs focus on each other and ignore everything else. We shouldn't get close to them, even if we have good intentions, because we might get hurt.



Tied, caged or isolated dogs may act unpredictably, as they have less contact with people, get less love and attention, and can't interpret people's reactions. What's more, they may protect their house or territory. So never try to touch a tied-up or caged dog!





Never run if there is an unknown dog; if it is unfriendly, don't run away. Walk away slowly, if possible. If you can't leave, don't look straight in the dog's eyes, try to call for help, and remain calm. If the dog still attacks you, try to cover your head with your hands.

Unknown dogs should only be stroked with the permission of their owner.



Never stroke stray dogs or those that look ill. Don't touch an unknown dog through a fence, even if he looks friendly, as he might protect his territory. Make sure that children don't tease dogs behind a fence, for example by poking them with sticks.

Epilogue

We hope our booklet has provided some useful information for both adults and children. We created this programme in order to help children learn more about the rules of living together with dogs. This will hopefully lead to fewer attacks and injuries.

Our relationship with dogs has changed dramatically during the last two decades. Most dog owners consider their pet to be a family member who also has a close relationship with the children. The harmony between them is important for the development of empathy. Caring for and raising an animal helps a child to learn about routine, as well as helping to develop a sense of responsibility, and empathy for others. This experience is also useful for relationships with people and other children.

It is important to emphasise the role of parents, who should supervise all interactions between dogs and children. The early teaching of children, including experience-based education, plays a significant part in this process too.

The booklet “Living together in harmony” was designed for parents and school teachers. The pictures show the main rules regarding people and dogs living together. Discussing happy, positive experiences is as important as describing dangerous situations and ways to avoid them. Although many dangerous situations are introduced in this leaflet, the aim is not to suggest that keeping a dog is dangerous. Keeping an animal is a great experience, but a balanced relationship is impossible without people observing some basic rules. So please take the time to talk about the responsibilities involved when keeping pets before illustrating the dangerous situations with dogs. The conversation may also include information about cats or other animals that children like to talk about. It is important that children can take part in the conversation and relate their own stories while being informed about the seven essential rules of being a responsible pet owner.

The key to a balanced relationship with animals is about communicating clearly in the right way. The chapter about canine body language was created to offer help in understanding the signs. Only the most important behaviours were introduced because of the limited length of the booklet, but the number of situations can be extended if necessary. It also offers a great opportunity for an interesting game where children apply the information to human body language. For example, children can mimic movements like a dog wagging his tail, but they can also show how a happy person behaves.

The “What if...” chapter can be introduced with acting or via conversation. The purpose of this chapter is to inform children about the feelings of dogs in specific situations by building on their empathy. If children can empathise with dogs about their feelings when they are scared, it is easier for them to understand the reasons leading to dog attacks. It is easier to relate to situations they already know or can recognise.

The last chapter introduces the most important, potentially dangerous situations, pointing out ways of avoiding or solving them. Let the children take their time to consider the information presented. Role-play the situations with toys, if possible, talk about them together, and let the children draw pictures about their thoughts. Don't forget that the purpose of this project is not to scare the children! The cartoons of the dog and the children help to present the information in a fun, playful way. Most of the chapters contain tips – these should always be adapted to the needs of the actual children or group. You can follow the order of the booklet, but it is also possible to discuss the relevant topics of each chapter. We hope that children take on board the information and tell their brothers, sisters, friends and parents about it!

We know that our booklet “Living together in harmony” is just a small step on a long road, but we hope that it will bring us and our children closer to the possibility of people and dogs living together in harmony.



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