

SAFE KIDS/SAFE DOGS: Rules of the Game for Parents

Dogs are born with certain, natural behaviors such as chasing, tugging and mouthing. Many dog owners allow these natural behaviors to get out of hand and this can be trouble. Or, dog owners feel that these behaviors are bad and do not allow dogs any opportunity to do what is natural for them in a controlled manner. The dog gets frustrated as his instincts are being squashed. Under certain circumstances, games that encourage tugging and chasing can be great for dogs. Under the wrong circumstances, the games can be bad. The rule of all games with dogs and humans is: Human starts, Human ends. **THESE RULES APPLY TO ADULTS AS WELL!**

The rules of the game pertaining to children and dogs are:

1) *Children will not encourage dogs to chase them.* Children mimic prey with their fast actions, high voices and running. Even in dogs just playing and not perceiving a threat, a tackle and bite can hurt a child. The dogs often pay with their lives or end up being isolated from their pack. The rules to be set by adults regarding chasing games are: Dogs will learn to chase balls, sticks, toys and can run and chase other dogs at dog parks while playing. Dogs will be taught not to fence run at people and other animals walking by. Children will not encourage dogs to fence run.

2) *Children will not play games of tug.* Children are too much like prey; are often are not mature enough to safely reinforce certain rules with tug and let the game get out of control. Adults must teach dogs to release items such as toys when told to. If dog brings a tug toy to human, dog must do some obedience work first, then the adult may play tug. Every few minutes, the game is stopped and the dog works a bit, then the game may resume. Another option is to use bungee cords and tie a heavy rope to a tree for the dog to tug against. The bungee cords allow the rope to move and be pulled back as if something else was playing too.

3) *Children will not do things that encourage dogs to jump on or potentially nip people.* Dangling toys, treats and wiggling fingers and feet in a dog's face can be too much to resist, poking the dog, etc. This can easily end up with the child having something sewn back together like a face and the dog being isolated, given up or even dying. Many dogs are gotten rid of because they nipped a child. Many times the child instigated the nip! The dog was just doing what was natural and encouraged by the child's actions. Adults must ensure that children and dogs both learn to play well together and are always supervised!

Dog play can be rough to the casual observer. Two dogs playing can get very rowdy and this is part of normal dog play. They use paws, mouths and their bodies. However, the way dogs play with each other is not a safe way to play with humans. Look into alternative and safer games for children to play with dogs. Make certain children do not teach the dog to bite or jump. A child can quickly retrain a dog and teach it undesired actions and behaviors. If these behaviors get out of hand, there can be trouble. Pets must learn that mouthing humans is not good. Children, see people doing Schutzhund or police work with dogs and like to imitate it. This is very dangerous and the dogs the children see on TV or sporting events are highly trained. Children must not play these types of games with dogs.

Dogs need toys that allow them to use their natural behaviors. Buster Cubes encourage the hunt and work for food. Take part of the daily kibble ration and place it in the cube for the dog to work out. Kong toys and natural bones with a bit of cream cheese, peanut butter, canned dog food or semi-soft treats tucked inside encourage chewing behaviors in a controlled manner. The dog can use his mouth on something safely. Hiding these toys allows the dog to hunt and seek. Balls, flying discs, tossed fleece or canvas toys allow the dog to chase and tackle safely. Get a group of friends with well-socialized dogs together once a week at someone's house for a couple hours of dogs being dogs! Allowing dogs to be dogs along with reinforcing the rules of play with humans will go a long way in increasing the harmony between us and them and hopefully help decrease the chance of a child or even an adult being bitten.