



The Woof-Meow Show

1653 Union St., Bangor, ME 04401-2204
(207) 945-6841 – donh@greenacreskennel.com

The “Woof-Meow” show is on every Sunday at 8:30PM on WVOM, 103.9FM, the Voice of Maine. Hosted by Don Hanson of Green Acres Kennel Shop, the show focuses on educating dog and cat guardians about their dogs and cats.

AIR DATE: 11FEB07 & 18FEB07

GUEST: Colleen Pelar, CPDT with Don Hanson & Kate Dutra

Kids and Dogs with Author, Colleen Pelar, CPDT

Note: The following written summary is based on a radio show interview with Colleen Pelar as well as her book, *Living with Kids and Dogs... Without Losing Your Mind, A Parent's Guide to Controlling the Chaos*. For more in depth information on this topic, we highly recommend purchasing this book which has won the Humane Society of the United States Compassionate Care Award.

Colleen Pelar, author of *Living with Kids and Dogs... Without Losing Your Mind, A Parent's Guide to Controlling the Chaos*, has been training dogs professionally since 1991. Currently Colleen is the training manager of All About Dogs, Inc., in Northern Virginia, where emphasis is placed on the successful integration of dogs into the busy family lives of today. Colleen is an active member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) and has received her certification as a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT).

What are the statistics surrounding dog bites and children?

Approximately 2.8 million children are bitten annually by dogs. Typically boys are twice as likely to be bitten as girls and children between the ages of 5 and 9 are the largest demographic group to receive bites. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), half of all children under the age of 14 have been bitten at some point in their lives. Sixty-one percent of the time, the dogs that bite are known to the children; and are either their own family dog or the dog of a friend. It is much less likely that bites are inflicted by dogs running at large.

While the statistics can be alarming, it is possible that children and dogs can live together successfully. Since most bites occur with familiar dogs, we, as responsible guardians and parents, can be proactive and prevent many of these bites from ever happening through proper training and management.

If somebody were to ask you prior to obtaining a puppy or dog what advice you would you pass along to them?

Two of the most important considerations are whether or not the parent(s) want to have a dog and why. The reality is that, while a child may really want a dog, the responsibility of caring for and training the dog will ultimately fall on the parents. No matter what promises a child may make about feeding, brushing, and training the dog, there are limitations to what they can be expected to do, and as a parent and pet guardian the responsibility for ensuring these tasks are done is yours. Even a teenager can easily get caught up in their busy schedule and forget to feed the dog. There are many reasons for wanting a dog however simply enjoying spending time with them is a must. Perhaps another type of pet may be more appropriate for a particular family.

People also need to consider the expense that goes into having a dog. The average cost of dog ownership minimally ranges from \$500.00 to \$1,000.00 annually. When assessing the cost, one must consider things such as food, health care, grooming, toys, crates, training, boarding fees and possible damage to household items. Should your pet have any special health considerations the financial responsibility can rise considerably.

Another thing to factor in is what the current circumstances of your household are and whether or not you are at a point where adding a dog will enhance the family dynamics or have a deleterious effect upon the household. For example, many people want to get a puppy so that their child can grow up together with a dog. If however, you are a mother chasing after an 18 month old, is this really a good time to add one more fast moving, destructive body to your home? It is also important to consider whether or not you have the time to fit a puppy into your busy schedule. Puppies and dogs require a considerable amount of attention and it is imperative that this is not overlooked. If you are expecting or have just recently added an infant to your home, this is NOT the time to get a puppy. Babies require an extreme amount of care and are exhausting. The belief that you will have the time and ability to train a puppy while home on maternity is a fallacy.

What age should children be before introducing a dog into the home?

Prior to the age of ~5, children lack empathy, and really do not understand how to be nice to pets. If you are a parent with a dog and children under 5, it is your responsibility to always closely supervise your child(ren) and model appropriate behavior when interacting with the dog. This does not mean that after your child turns 5 supervision is no longer necessary. Until your child and dog meet certain criteria, there should always be supervision of all interactions.

What are the criteria of a good family dog?

Three criteria that are of the utmost importance are:

1. the dog must be friendly and social
2. the dog does not guard resources
3. the dog is compatible with the energy level of the family (i.e., a bulldog would not be the best fit for somebody who wants a dog to run 5k everyday).

Beyond the items listed above, you need to determine the criteria of what you are looking for in a dog (big, small, short hair, long hair, couch potato, energetic) and then narrow down your list to those few items your family believes to be the most crucial. It is more important to focus on the personality aspects of the dog than the physical ones! There is one exception to this: little dogs are not recommended for families with young

children as it is too easy to cause them injury, and children will be apt to want to carry them which is not recommended.

Many people look at specific breeds of dogs to determine if they will make good pets, but it is far more valuable to look at the specific traits of an individual dog, than to simply make assumptions based upon their breed. There can be huge variations within litters, not to mention within breeds.

[What are the items needed to succeed in living with kids and dogs?](#)

The single most important item to creating a successful relationship between your dog and your family is to have both parents knowledgeable and on board with the acquisition of this new family member. It is important to understand dogs in general and your dog in particular. All parents should be familiar with calming signals and understand that they are one of the most important ways a dog can communicate when he or she is feeling stressed. (for more information on calming signals, Green Acres recommends the book *On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals*, by Turid Rugaas). Everyone should be aware that ALL dogs have the potential to bite and by reading their body language accurately, parents can step in and intervene at the first signs of trouble versus waiting until after a bite has occurred.

Teaching the children how to behave when in the presence of dogs is as important as training the dog. When a child runs screaming, waving their hands in the air, a dog is apt to pursue them as they would prey. Or when a child stands in front of a dog and stares him in the eyes, the dog is apt to perceive this as a threat display and may react. The difficulty lies in the fact that the kids are just behaving like kids and the dogs like dogs. The dogs should be expected to learn proper manners such as not jumping and basic cues. (All dogs should be taught appropriate bite inhibition so that if an accident ever does occur, injury can be minimized.)

As far as some of the material items that are needed, two essentials would be **baby gates** and **crates**. These allow you to easily manage your dog and child(ren) when you are unable to closely supervise their interactions. It is important that your child not be allowed to tease your dog when he or she is in their crate. The crate should always be a “safe zone” for the dog. Gates are also beneficial in keeping the dog out of the kitchen when your child is eating. **Cordless phones** are also a must. There is simply no way to carry on a phone conversation in one room and see Billy trying to read a story to the dog in the other room. If you do not have a cordless phone, either your child(ren) or your dog must come with you anytime you answer the phone. If you have a child in diapers, a **locking diaper pail** will save you endless hours of clean up. While we think it disgusting, dogs find dirty diapers to be absolutely irresistible treats. There are many more things that prove useful such as tethers, mats, storm doors, etc.

[Is 100% supervision really necessary?](#)

Until your child and dog have met certain criteria, constant vigilance is critical. There is no magical age when this will occur, and every situation needs to be assessed individually. For some detailed suggestions as to when you can decrease your level of supervision, visit Doggonessafe.com.

While we understand that 100% supervision is extremely difficult and is necessary in order to prevent bites from occurring, we also are aware that it is simply not reality. Planning for those times when you cannot adequately supervise is crucial. Making use of gates, crates, and other tools, in addition to training your dog to follow you and teaching your children to respect and behave appropriately in the presence of dogs will payoff in

the long run. Please remember that children need to reach a certain level of maturity before they will truly be capable of meeting the necessary criteria to be left unsupervised with your dog.

How do I know if the dog I already have will be good with children?

No matter how wonderful your dog is, even with the best of dogs, miscommunication and accidents can and do happen. By looking objectively at your dog, you can get a better feel for how your dog may react when children are present. Ask yourself some questions: How much exposure has your dog had to children? Does your dog get overwhelmed with a lot of noise and chaos? Is your dog reactive to fast moving objects? Does he or she welcome handling from virtually anyone or is your dog apt to shy away? Does your dog guard food, toys or places? Once we can read our dog's body language, and we objectively look at them we can better be prepared for their needs in given situations. Some dogs thrive living with children, while for others it is sheer torture. Some dogs are great with the children that reside in the home, but do not enjoy the chaos that ensues when they have friends over. Unfortunately, there are no crystal balls that can predict with 100% accuracy how your dog will react, however if we pay attention we can certainly make some solid educated guesses.

Why should I have to be an advocate for my dog?

All too often, people believe that a family dog should be willing to tolerate virtually any and everything. This is simply not the case. Dogs are living, breathing, emotional beings similar to us. Just because a dog is great with children, and does not bite when a child tugs on his ear or teases him with a toy, this does not mean that the dog is enjoying being handled in this way. It is your responsibility as a parent to teach your children to be respectful and kind to your dog. By doing this, we are not only protecting our dogs, but we are also protecting our children from being bitten. Fido might usually not be reactive when your child tugs his ear, but the day that he has an ear infection will most likely be a much different story. Additionally, should your child learn that it is acceptable to manhandle your dog they may believe that it is okay to behave in a similar manner around other dogs, which can certainly lead to the occurrence of bites.

What can a child be expected to do with the family dog?

It is important that children play a role in the care of the family dog, however their tasks must be appropriate for their age and level of physical and emotional maturity. (Remember, it is the responsibility of the parent to follow through and make sure that the dog has received the proper care.)

While babies often love to watch dogs, their interest really starts to blossom as they move into the toddler stage. It is at this point that they must be very carefully supervised, as they have no concept of how to behave around dogs (and won't for many years) and are apt to threaten the dog's sense of safety. Dogs must always be given an escape route out of a room. It is important during this stage that dogs learn to associate the new addition with positive rewards such as treats, games, and interaction with you.

During the preschool years, children are still too young to understand empathy and kindness, however they are learning and will model your behavior. This is a difficult stage as it requires a significant amount of intervention, however it is also a great age to help them to begin to learn to respect and treat others gently. Through talking and modeling, your children can learn what dogs enjoy and do not enjoy. Rather than always saying do not do something, it is helpful to give your child something positive that they can do. With your

assistance your child can help to “train” already known behaviors, so that the dog will begin to respond and a positive relationship can be started.

Once your child is in his or her elementary school years they can and should start to assume more responsibility for the family dog, with your supervision of course. Training and playing games such as hide and seek is great fun for both the kids and the dogs and really serves to strengthen the bond. Kids this age are excellent trainers. Kids and dogs can still get into trouble during these years, sometimes because the children love them too much and do not allow the dogs any peace and quiet. One job that is not advised is the walking of the dog. Many unexpected events can occur when a dog is out for a walk, a cat bolting in front of your dog, another dog running at large, etc., and children of this age are often not physically or emotionally mature enough to handle these situations. It is this stage when children begin to learn how their behaviors affect the behaviors of the dog.

The teenage years, when kids are old enough to assume more responsibility for the family dog, is often a time of turmoil and extremely chaotic schedules. Dogs may become less of a focal point of your child’s life at this stage, but still needed for emotional support on those tough days. Some teenagers really benefit from taking their dogs to training classes and competitions.

[How do I help my child say goodbye?](#)

Saying goodbye is never easy and when children are involved it can be especially difficult. It is important to remember that, depending upon the age of your child and his or her personality, reactions can be very different. Allowing each child to grieve in his or her own way is crucial. Do not lie to your child about the death of their beloved pet as this often leads to confusion. On the other hand, if you have made the decision that your dog is simply not happy living in a house with children and the best option is re-homing, be sure to frame the discussion in a way that does not place blame on your child or that does not emphasize what was lacking in your own home.