

Three Steps to Greeting a Dog

Following are the three steps to guide a child through a safe and happy greeting with a friendly dog. (These apply to adults too, but are especially important for kids to understand.)

1 Ask the Dog's Guardian

Teach your kids never to rush toward a dog. Tell them to stop about five feet away and ask the dog's guardian, "May I please pet your dog?" Sometimes the answer will be no. Many dogs do not live with kids and are not comfortable with them. So, if the human with the dog says no, that's okay. Remind your kids that there are lots of other dogs who would love to be petted by them.

If the guardian says yes, *then the children must next ask the dog.*

2 Ask the Dog—DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP!

Tell kids that dogs don't use words, but instead rely on body language to communicate. Pantomime various emotions such as anger, fear, and excitement to show the kids that humans use body language, too.

Have your children make a fist with the palm facing down. Then they can slowly extend their arm for the dog to sniff their hand. (Teaching kids to curl their fingers in minimizes the risk of a dog nipping a finger.)

When the dog is being given an opportunity to sniff, watch his body language. Does he come forward with loose, waggly motions? If so, the dog says yes.

Does he lean forward for a quick sniff and seem comfortable? This is also a yes.

Does the dog turn his face away from the child's hand? Back away? Bark? Move behind the owner? Look anxious and unsettled? Growl? These are all ways a dog says no. Unfortunately some people either don't understand or respect their dog's decision and will drag the dog forward saying, "Oh, he's fine. He loves kids. You can pet him."

DON'T! Do not ever allow your children to pet a dog who does not approach them willingly.

3 Pet the Dog

If the guardian says yes and the dog says yes, then your children can pet the dog. Suggest that they stroke the side of the dog's neck, rub under his chin, scratch his chest, or pet along his back. Most dogs prefer slow, gentle strokes over rapid pat-pat-patting.

(Most dogs don't like to be petted on top of their heads, but nearly all people pet dogs this way. There is a blind spot on top of a dog's head. If a dog sees your child's hand moving toward that area, the natural inclination is for him to tilt his head up and watch where the hand is going, which positions your child's hand directly over the unfamiliar dog's mouth and teeth.)

*From Living With Kids & Dogs...Without Losing Your Mind:
A Parent's Guide To Controlling the Chaos by Colleen Pelar*