

# Pet Safety Guide for Parents and Children



Pets provide our families with love and companionship. Yet, over 155,000 children in the U.S. are bitten by pets each year. Here's how to keep kids safe around animals.

## Choosing a pet

Most animal bites happen at home with animals we know. Children ages 5 to 9 years old are the most likely to be bitten. Choosing pets that fit with your family's lifestyle, home, and yard can help prevent bites. Take the time to find out how much space and exercise a pet will need because animals can be more dangerous when these needs are not met. In this tip sheet you'll find some useful resources about finding a pet that's right for your family.

## Safety with your own pets

Every pet, even the friendliest one, has the potential to bite, especially if the pet feels threatened, scared, or becomes overly excited. Animal bites can be serious, but you can help prevent them by following some basic tips:

- Never leave your child alone with any animal.
- Spay or neuter your pet. This will help decrease aggression and other problems.

- Do not play rough games, like wrestling, with your dog.
- Keep your pets' vaccinations up to date, including rabies.
- Teach your child not to surprise, make loud noises, or ever sneak up on an animal.
- Teach your child not approach an animal when it is eating.
- Teach your child not to try and take a toy, bone, or other treat from an animal.

## Warning signs

Did you know that most animals don't like to be hugged? An animal who is feeling threatened in some way is more likely to snap or bite. Children (and adults) may not understand the warning signs animals give. Warn your child to stay away from any animal who is:

- eating
- caring for its young
- growling or showing its teeth
- acting strangely

Below are signs that a dog or cat is feeling threatened enough to bite.

## Warning Signs that Animals Give

Dogs	Cats
Growling, baring teeth	Hissing and/or low yowling
Ears back	Arching back
Hair on back standing up	Ears back flat
Staring	Baring teeth

Understanding these common warning signs can help prevent a bite, and keep you and your child safe.

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## Safety with other people's pets

It's especially important to be alert to these signs with strange pets that don't know you or your child. Teach and enforce these simple rules with your child:

Do	Don't
Ask permission before you pet someone else's animal.	Pet or approach a stranger's dog without permission.
Let a new dog sniff your closed hand (no fingers) before you try to pet it, and only if the owner and your parent say it's okay.	Play rough, tease, or sneak up on an animal.
Stand quietly and back away slowly if you see warning signs.	Look any aggressive animal directly in the eye.

## Preventing infections

Pets and other animals sometimes carry diseases which can easily be transferred to humans. These health hazards are more likely to affect children less than 5 years old. Pregnant women, older adults, and people with suppressed immune systems are also at higher risk.

Reptiles (turtles, lizards, and snakes) and birds (baby chicks and ducklings) are most likely to carry these diseases, but other kinds of infection can be right in your own backyard – living on or inside your pets:

- Worms, such as roundworms and hookworms, can infect dogs, cats, and some other animals. The worms live in the intestines and their eggs are passed in the animal's stool. Some of these worms can be passed on to humans. Ask your veterinarian about treating your animals on a regular basis to prevent worms.

- Ticks, fleas, and mosquitoes can also transmit infection from animals to humans. Be sure to:
  - Keep pets free of fleas and ticks.
  - Check for ticks after you or your pet have been outdoors.
  - Use insect repellent and clothing that covers you and your child to help prevent bug bites.

**Because these health hazards are so common, it is important that children (and adults) wash their hands after touching or cleaning up after any animal.**

For questions about the health of your pets, contact your veterinarian.

## A word about wildlife

Children are often curious about wild animals and may be tempted to approach or feed them. Since wild and feral animals can carry diseases (such as rabies) that can be passed to people, it is important to teach your children:

- Never approach any wild animal, including feral cats, stray dogs, and birds.
- If they find any injured animal, do not touch it, but tell an adult and have them call the local animal control agency instead.

## Call Kaiser Permanente if...

- You or a family member is scratched or bitten by any dog, cat, or other animal and it breaks the skin (even if it's your own pet).
- You or a family member has contact with *any* wild animal.

Don't delay in seeking treatment, as serious infections often develop.

### Other resources

#### Books

- *Choosing a Dog* by Nancy Baer and Steve Duno
- *The Perfect Puppy* by Benjamin L. Hart, D.V.M. and Lynette A. Hart

#### Web sites

- Visit our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov/healthypets](http://cdc.gov/healthypets)
- KidsHealth: [kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org)

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.