

Do You Really Want a Puppy for Your Child?

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It's Disney-esque: Your beautiful 3-year-old boy's eyes go wide and he squeals in glee as you pull out a small, squirming puppy. You set the puppy down and he runs to the excited child, yipping, and crawls into his lap to cuddle gently. They grow up together, your child wrestling with the puppy, playing fetch, and running through the yard.

Unfortunately, this is rarely how it works. Instead, that squirming puppy nips you until you put him down. He then runs to your little boy and, instead of cuddling, he starts jumping and nipping. Naturally, your boy starts to scream, wiggle, and run. Puppy gives chase, nipping at sensitive skin and tugging on pantlegs. Your little boy hates the puppy, and puppy has learned some nasty habits which will likely put him in a shelter.

Most people don't realize that putting a puppy and a toddler together is like putting two toddlers together: neither one has self-control, both need to be watched closely while they play, and should be separated before play gets rough enough that someone gets hurt. But having a puppy is worse: puppies have sharp teeth and claws, lots of energy, and don't understand "no." In fact, most of our automatic responses to puppy's habit of mouthing and chasing actually make the problem worse. By yelling at, pushing, or otherwise engaging the puppy, you encourage the behavior. How does he know you're not just playing?

It's certainly possible to live with a young child and a puppy, but most people don't want to deal with that kind of stress. It's hard enough keeping track of an active toddler, but it's even harder to add to that a puppy, which requires constant management to prevent soiling the house, biting, chewing, and chasing. It's too much for most families to handle, and most puppies are the ripe old age of 1 or 2 years when their families finally give up and get rid of them.

Be sure to educate yourself about what it's like to have a puppy. Talk to people who recently got a puppy. Hang out at their house and watch for a day. Take your toddler with you and watch them interact. Too much for you? Imagine living with it!

If your heart is set on getting a dog for your child, look into an adult dog! A mellow 5- or 6-year old dog is still plenty young for your child to grow up with, but most have calmed down enough to not get riled up by an active toddler. Check your local shelters, talk to the staff, and foster a few dogs before settling on the one that fits your family perfectly. It will be much more enjoyable for all of you.