

Children and Dogs



Your Family Pack

Dogs are pack animals, meaning they live in a group with a strict social structure. When a dog joins your family, he needs to learn his position within your family's "pack." He is always testing to see if he can move up in rank. For everyone's safety and comfort, all humans need to be higher in the pack order than the dog.

From a dog's perspective, children may have a more difficult time establishing and holding their position in the pack. A dog is often eye level with a toddler, and this can be frightening to both him and the child. Because of the similar size, he may view the child as equal to him. He may feel he has the right to discipline the child when he or she tries to take his food or toy, or plays too rough. If children treat a dog brusquely, that is how he thinks he should interact with his pack. All children (even ones who visit your home) need to treat him gently, with respect and kindness. From the day the dog joins the family, training both the dog and the child is essential to ensure safety and happiness of the entire pack.

Establishing the house rules immediately and enforcing them is critical. The RAG Foster Manual states: **"always supervise any children around your foster dog. If you cannot supervise, then separate the foster dog from your children. Never let your children walk or feed a foster dog until the dog has been in your home and you know the dog." a small child should never be left alone with any dog.**

It is a good idea to let your new golden and children get used to each other from across the room or yard. A golden may have had a negative experience with children before entering your home. Permit him to keep his distance until he is comfortable, rather than allow your kids to corner him or force him to be petted or hugged.

A Few Weeks in....

Don't relax your supervision because things are going well. Your new dog will go through an adjustment period of several weeks. He will be on his best behavior while he tries to figure out the rules. Once he settles in, he may get annoyed with child's poking or pulling, and might nip to discipline. This is the way a dog would discipline another dog that has gotten too pushy. It is natural canine behavior, but it is definitely unacceptable in a human family.

Be careful not to make your children jealous by giving the new dog too much time and attention. They may show their frustration by punishing the dog when you're not watching them closely.

Games to Avoid

Tug-of-War, Chasing, Wrestling, or Jumping for toys/food (also known as teasing). These games are based on rough play and can lead to undesired behaviors, especially if the rules of engagement are not strictly enforced. A tiny puppy tugging on socks or fingers may seem cute, but the puppy is learning that biting is acceptable. It may be difficult to stop the behavior once the puppy is older.

If children run and scream in play, it can trigger the chase response in a dog because the children are acting like prey. The dog is likely to chase and jump on a child, perhaps knocking him down.

Games to Play

Hide and Seek: One person takes a toy and hides. Another holds the dog. The hider calls the dog while the holder encourages the dog to go and find. Once the dog finds the hiding person, the toy gets tossed for the dog. This game also encourages the dog to want to come to pack members when called.

Find the Treat: Take several solid colored plastic cups (the opaque kind) and hide a treat under one. Have the dog find the treat. The more cups that are placed over a larger area, the more challenging the game becomes.

Fetch: Fabulous game for some (but not all) golden retrievers. However, do not allow it to turn into a tug-of-war for the toy!

Silly Pet Tricks: Tricks are not only fun to teach and learn, but also can have practical applications. Lifting up feet, rolling over on the back, etc., can be helpful when grooming. Kids can have fun learning how to teach the golden new commands while playing safely!

Training Classes

Obedience classes are recommended to help your golden adjust to his status in your family's pack. Classes are held in local pet stores, through Parks and Recreation Departments, and through private companies. Some trainers will come to your home. Often, these programs allow older children to participate.