When Are Kids the “Right Age” to Get a Dog?

To decide, answer these other questions, first.

By **Kathy Callahan, CPDT-KA** - **Published:** March 28, 2021



A normal metric would say no to the idea of a baby and four large dogs. But for the author's family, it was perfect. The key is how interested the adults are in making the situation work.

“As soon as Sam is the right age, we’re going to get a dog,” my friend said. According to her research, 5 years old is the magic number.

The problem with that enticingly simple rule is that there are plenty of 5-year-olds who are nowhere near ready to share a household safely with a dog – and plenty of 2-year-olds who are. Further, there are *teenagers* who can either be an incredible asset or a dangerous weak link.

The actual key to successful dog ownership is whether the *adults* in the household are ready to manage the situation. If they are, then almost any dog/child combination can work. Is the timing right for your family? Here are the five questions to ask yourself:

1. Is at least one adult in the household truly excited about owning a dog? If you’re doing it simply “for the kids,” don’t. For busy parents who didn’t really want a dog in the first place, the relentless nature of canine care quickly becomes overwhelming.

2 Is the dog lover in the family the one who is home and available most? If the canine enthusiast works 70 hours a week but promises to handle the dog care, this is not the time to get a dog. Even very smart dogs cannot be trained to throw up on the rug only when Daddy is home.

3. Who will train the dog? The dog/children combination is deeply rewarding when the dogs are nicely integrated into the household through good management and training – and virtually impossible to cope with when they are not. Will you be able to find the focus and energy necessary to teach a dog the behavior that is crucial to parental sanity and child safety? Will you be ready to problem-solve – “He tore apart Fluffy the bear!” – thinking through solutions incorporating exercise, training, gates for dog-free zones, strategic storage of enticing items, etc.?

4. Who will train the kids? No matter how much you work with a dog, if she is exposed to kids who put pencils in her ears, she will learn to defend herself. You won’t be okay with the result. Training your children – and their friends – how to play kindly and safely with dogs is imperative. Can you commit to that careful oversight?

5. How do you feel about chaos? I know you’re picturing a sleepy puppy snuggling in your child’s lap. Here’s a more helpful visualization exercise: The playdate mommy is on your porch, horrified because she’s just stepped in some poop. You can’t hear her over your sobbing toddler, whose Pop-Tart was stolen by your puppy. As you stand in the doorway apologizing, the puppy slips out, runs through the mud, and jumps up on the playdate mommy’s daughter, who is (was) wearing a lovely dress.

Now I ask you: Are you ready for a dog?

Dogs always bring a certain measure of unpredictable chaos to a home. For our family, that’s been welcome. It’s been a 25-year tapestry of funny, warm chaos. Knowing we can’t have a pristine white couch has been the doorway to a more relaxed lifestyle. The acceptance that a shoe may get chewed has been a reminder not to value possessions too highly. Having animals in our house has taught lessons in rolling with the punches and laughing at mishaps. Not a bad curriculum for your kids, right?

The key is that the adults in the household have to embrace that outlook. So, it comes down to whether the *parents* are ready for a dog. Are you ready to handle that inevitable muddy-Pop-Tart-disaster of a morning with a little quick action, a lot of laughter, and then some problem-solving? If so – you're the right age for a dog!

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