

## German Shepherd Dogs as Pets for Families with Small Children, Older Children, and Future Babies

At least once a week, I receive an email from folks who:

- want a German Shepherd Puppy & have very young children  
or
- want a German Shepherd Puppy and, though they have no current children, hope to have them in the future. They ask me if I think a German Shepherd Dog make a good family pet.

A German Shepherd Dog can make an excellent family pet. However, the dog has been bred for specific traits that can be incompatible with such families' life style. I think that people must be truly honest about their reasons for wanting a German Shepherd Dog and in their understanding of the breed's characteristics. There must be a real commitment to serious socialization around kids, other dogs, and activity from the time the puppy begins his life with the family. A failure to spend enough time exposing the puppy to these stimuli will have definite consequence on the puppy's behavior as an adult.

Here are some facts:

- ALL baby puppies (all breeds) will go through a teething phase. For humans, this means dealing with things like puppy biting, nipping, grabbing on to pants, slippers, children's toys, mittens, & items left on a coffee table; anything they can put in their mouth and chew on. For humans with small children, this means the puppy might knock your child down in his efforts to play with this new "littermate", or might cause your child to cry with his nipping. Children who do not understand how to react, often hit or kick at the puppy. This is never good.
- What you expose a puppy to in his young, formative weeks will set the stage for who he becomes as an adult.
- German Shepherd Dogs have been bred for particular qualities. These include Herding ability, problem solving ability, protective Nature, and Courage. This means that your puppy might grow up

and think he needs to do things like "protect" your kids from their friends, if there is wrestling going on.

- When not completely and properly socialized, the best bred German Shepherd Dog \*might\* mature to show a defensiveness to other dogs, especially when out on a leash or when in his own territory, as well as exhibit a suspicion of strangers and a desire to protect his owner from what the DOG deems unacceptable threats. How a dog handles himself in later life is largely a result of what the owner has done when the dog was a puppy.

"What led you to decide on a German Shepherd Dog?" When I pose this question, common answers include: loyalty, intelligence, and protective nature. In my opinion, these are excellent qualities, but also the very same qualities that can create problems in a family pet.

For those folks who can not commit to extensive socialization and training, I do believe there are other breeds more suitable to join them as family companions. In fact, I think the best suited breed might be social to everyone, and have none of a Herding dog's traits. (Examples: A Bichon or a Pug might work, or for more active families, a Lab. A Husky is generally friendly to everyone.. although, very high energy, and they can be difficult to train and have a tendency to wander/run when loose.)

Potential buyers sometimes tell me they have no children, but need a puppy who will be trustworthy with visiting relatives, or, they tell me they need a puppy who will adjust well if the couple has a child in the future. I can not BREED this behavior into a puppy. I can breed parents with excellent character, and produce puppies with a good, sane brain. The puppy's new family must do the rest.

Having your sister's children, your neighbors children, your cousins children over once a month on a Sunday is NOT adequate socializing. If you want a puppy who can go to kids' sporting events, feel comfortable with all ages of child doing all manner of moving, noise making, and general bedlam, and accompany you and your kids everywhere: you MUST work hard to create positive and numerous

situations where the puppy learns that this is all a part of his normal life.

A baby puppy will be happy and friendly to most everyone. I have had families tell me "Well, Fido met some kids when he was little and he loved them! But, we saw my niece for the first time in 6 months, and Fido (now age 2 or 3) put his hackles up and jumped at her! He didn't bite, but I think he might have considered it!"

Trust me folks; a little social interaction as a baby is NOT enough for most dogs!!!

Having decided on a German Shepherd Dog, with full understanding of his instincts and characteristics, what can you do to help the puppy grow to be a super, well adjusted family member?

Socialize, Socialize, Socialize. Meet new people and dogs and go new places several times a week. Take puppy to the town soccer fields, to "watch" games with you. I guarantee you will attract some visitors who want to interact with your puppy. Be sure puppy never feels overwhelmed. Ask people to give him a cookie, or to kneel low to his level to greet him. Do not let people pick him up. Once your puppy knows SIT, work on having him SIT for petting and treats.

If it is important your puppy be accustomed to small children, take him to a nursery school or Kindergarten during pick up/drop off time. Walk around. Some mothers and children will undoubtedly approach and ask to meet your puppy.

In both above situations, children will be running, or walking by, or playing. The noise level that comes along with young kids will also be something puppy will notice.

In addition to this type of situation, some one on one interaction with family children or neighbors' kids is also advisable. Even if you have a fenced yard, take puppy for walks in your neighborhood, where he can see kids on bikes and skates.

Take puppy to stores that allow pets, to an airport, to a friend's house. Have puppy play dates at your home and at a friend's home. ENROLL in PUPPY Kindergarten!! Take puppy to a lake or park with water. Take the puppy in the car frequently.

A puppy who never leaves home will not grow up to be a dog who is comfortable traveling everywhere with you.

**\*ALLOW\*** your puppy to play with other puppies, and don't hover nervously, worrying he will be harmed.

All of this takes a commitment of time. There is No shortcut. In addition to the experiences you set up, you also need to provide puppy with structure, exercise, and routine. You must teach him the rules of your house. These are the things that will shape who he becomes.

A last word on other dogs. I had a litter of puppies with super temperaments. Exactly the sort of puppy we strive for. All but one of these puppies was exposed to constant socialization and lots of other dogs. The puppy who was the exception DID get exposed to some social situations. The owner thought she was following the formula to a happy puppy, to some degree. However, the puppy's owner hovered over, over-protectively. She hesitated to take her puppy off lead to play with the others. She didn't encourage interaction with the group. She rarely took the puppy to meet new dogs or to the park. She had a busy schedule with her children and her work. The puppy had exercise and the puppy went with her frequently to her job. He was rarely alone, but, rarely with anyone but the owner.

Is it a surprise that this puppy grew up and started to exhibit aggression to other dogs? Especially when on leash? Not a surprise to me! The sad thing is that this puppy was the one I felt had the best character, an easy going nature and confidence. These things are normally a recipe for success as a family pet. Because of the puppy's upbringing, it became increasingly difficult to take the puppy places, as displays of aggression to other dogs became frequent, and the puppy even started to choose which people were acceptable to approach, and which were deemed worthy of defensive action.

In addition to a great deal of socialization, a *German Shepherd Dog* will need a capable leader; a handler who is consistent and fair in training. Note that I do not say that your puppy needs to be dominated. I do not say he needs a choke chain. You can be a confident, strong leader and earn your puppy's trust, without resorting to choke chains, physical restraint, or shock collars.

Lastly, you need to be honest about your skill level as a dog trainer. Often, new owners who have never trained a dog before, can "learn on the job" and be really good trainers who raise a great puppy. And just as often, owners who have had several dogs in the past, demonstrate no skill level and, in fact, are terrible trainers with confused puppies. If you are a loving owner, but admittedly have not been successful as a trainer in the past, you need to work with someone who can improve your timing, body language, and clarity. I have seen some really *GREAT* puppies pressured, over stressed and confused by well intentioned owners who are horrible trainers. (Horrible trainer does not mean horrible person! Be honest in your abilities and abandon your ego in favor of developing better skill!)

In summary, I feel that a *German Shepherd Dog* can be a great family dog, but may not be the right choice for everyone. Older/teenage children, especially those who have a desire to be involved in training and exercising, are often a more successful combination than toddlers and a *German Shepherd* puppy.

With work and time, a *German Shepherd* Puppy with a compatible temperament, drive level, and trainability, can fit into a family with young kids. We have placed numerous puppies - many now grown dogs - in homes with children, and the dogs are superb companions. These families have worked hard to raise a social and well behaved pet. (I instantly think of adorable little Ryan and his relationship with Storm. This family has children in a wide age range. The youngest, Ryan, seems to have developed a special bond with Storm. I receive frequent photos of Ryan and Storm playing together. Another success story; Dickens and Hazel with little Julia and Mason.)

Someone once told me that the very qualities that initially draw us to a partner (husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend) often wind up being the very things that later drive us crazy! I think puppy buyers should seriously consider whether the qualities they say draw them to this breed, are truly qualities they will enjoy down the road!