

10 Helpful Hints for Children Visiting Cats and Dogs

By Rev. Nancy Schluntz
Animal Intuitive & Interfaith Spiritual Guide
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How to prepare your cats and dogs for visitors,
set guidelines for positive and safe interactions,
and monitor the well-being of your pets and
visiting children.



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About the Author



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To give back to the community, Rev. Nancy volunteers at two local agencies: She is a wildlife rehabilitation and education docent at Sulphur Creek Nature Center in Hayward, California; and co-facilitates grief support groups for children who have lost a parent, at East Bay Agency for Children's Circle of Care program.

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Summer and holidays mean visits from the younger set, more activity around our house, and changes for all our schedules.

Some dogs and cats don't mind, and enjoy the extra activity and attention. Others are unnerved and threatened by the disruptions and changes in schedule. Dogs and cats respond and show their displeasure in many ways, including bowel upsets, growling and scratching, stealing children's toys, and other creative adventures.

For example, a clear connection developed between the arrival of a young mother and her three little boys, with my senior cat Tyson urinating on the living room carpet near the front door.



Our well-grounded Akita, Buki, helped two of the little ones learn to walk. They grabbed her fur, followed when she stood and slowly walked away. When she stopped, they released her fur and sat, amazed at what had just happened. Buki also was adept at removing a stuffed animal from a child's grip and taking it to her quiet place.

Our Australian shepherd, Katsina, is more high-strung. While she also steals toys, she is much more likely to become a competitor for attention and rise to the stimulation until she needs a time-out, and/or it is reflected graphically in her bowel movements.

Clear boundaries need to be set by the host family and the parents. Resident pets, visiting children, and parents all benefit from a clearly defined set of guidelines.

Preparing your animals before the visit is necessary, too. That is the subject of the next section.

Preparing Your Pets for Visitors

Before the Visit

Before your guests arrive let your animals know company is coming. They probably know already, but do them the courtesy of telling them directly. Use words, and at the same time hold a picture in your mind of who is coming. Pets that are accustomed to a quiet household must adapt to a higher energy level when visitors come. You need to prepare your animal companions for the changes in activity and energy levels, especially if they are high-strung or sensitive.

Let your pets know how long you expect the guests to stay. For example, “They will be here for supper, and will leave before bedtime.”

Be clear about how you expect your animals to behave. If your dog is usually allowed on the couch, but not when company comes, be clear where they are allowed to sit or lie down – on a rug or cushion of their own, for example.

Give each animal a special job to do while you have company, such as watching out for you and the safety of the children. Assure your pets that you will be watching out for them. Make sure your animals have a safety retreat, and remind them to go there when the need arises. As their pack leader, pay attention to their need for alone time.

A caution on animal retreats: they can be very attractive to the younger set. The dog’s crate, cat’s space under the desk, or any hidey-hole can be occupied by a youngster seeking a time-out or just wondering if they’ll be missed. You need to reinforce that the animal quiet places are just for the animals!

For Your Dog

Stay tuned to how your dog is interacting with the company, especially the children. Monitor snacks, and be sure the dog receives her food at the usual time. To avoid undue temptation (as well as surreptitious treats slipped under the table), our dog stays outside in the fenced back yard during human dinner time.

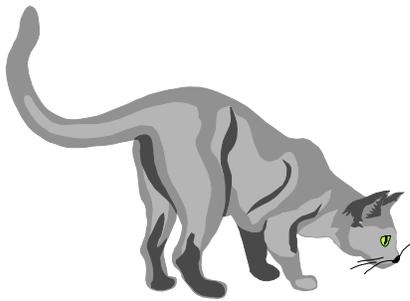


Keep your dog's regular routine as much as possible. If she's accustomed to an afternoon walk, take one. It might be shorter or accompanied by additional adults and children, but it's still a walk.

When your dog indicates it's time for quiet, honor that. Baby gates are an effective reminder long after they cease to be physical barriers. The alternative at our house is to secure the door to our office just enough that the dog can go in to curl up under my desk, but the door can't open wider to let children in.

For Your Cat

When I realized the connection between Tyson urinating on the carpet and the arrival of the young boisterous family, I had a conversation about it with him. He told me in no uncertain terms that he didn't like how I became ungrounded and scattered during these visits. It was too much work for him to keep the whole house energetically stable. I agreed to be aware of my own grounding and centeredness. He agreed to focus his energy on helping me stay balanced, and not try to "fix" the whole house.



For subsequent visits, our room upstairs became a sanctuary for him, complete with food, water and litter box. The door was propped open enough to allow him to go in and out, and I went up to sit with him from time to time. This process worked for both of us, and there were no more urinary incidents by the front door.

After Tyson became confident of his safety in his sanctuary, he occasionally came down to say hello to everyone. Sometimes he even allowed himself to be petted, before returning to his retreat.

Cats like high places – counters, bookshelves, window ledges. Yours has probably already selected a favorite perch. Heights let them view the activity while safely separated from it.

10 Helpful Hints I developed for our household

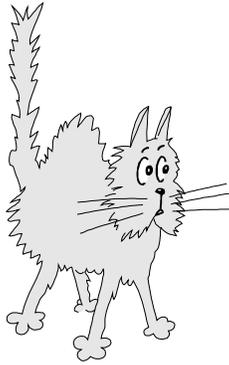
1. Always approach the dog/cat from the front, so she can see you.

Approaching animals from behind may startle them and draw an unexpected response. If she ducks, whips around to face you, or moves away, that tells you to slow down. First, let her sniff your hand, or just let her come to you.

After she has let you know it's okay to touch her, do not go straight for the head. We all want to pat that fuzzy head, but from an animal's perspective, a hand coming down over her face, near the eyes, is threatening. A better way is to gently touch her neck or shoulder. Then if she wants a head rub, she'll let you know.

2. Never gang up on her – one at a time please.

How would you feel if a gang of people or animals suddenly surrounded you? A bit nervous maybe? Introduce yourself to the dog/cat slowly and give her the space to make up her mind about you. She may want to just say Hi and leave, or may want to move in closer and join in the activity.



3. Animals have feelings, too, and can get scared at loud noises or voices that sound angry.

When people in the house get upset with each other, or even sound like they are, the dog/cat may feel you're angry at her, but not know why. Animal hearing is much more sensitive than human hearing, so if you make loud or sudden noises, it can scare her or hurt her ears. So have fun, and keep the noise level down.

4. Do not try to hug the dog/cat; let her come to you when she wants attention. When she shows you she has had enough, or tries to get away, let her go.

Some dogs and cats like to be hugged, others do not. Let her show you how close is close enough, and how long is long enough. Sometimes she's just as happy to sit beside you without being held. Even a huggable dog or cat does not want to feel like a prisoner.

5. When the dog/cat goes to one of her “quiet” places, leave her alone. [Her corner in the living room, another room, her crate, upstairs, or if she leaves to go outside by herself.] The dog/cat quiet place is off limits.

When the dog/cat leaves the scene of the action, it's a clear message that she has had enough. Enough noise, enough excitement, enough activity. Let her go. Maybe she just needs a nap. She will come back when she's ready. Or she may be tired of that activity and would be interested in something else, like a walk to the park.



6. If the dog gets too jumpy, or the cat hisses, let an adult know.

An over-excited dog can upset a child or contribute to escalating the excitement. A stressed cat may need to be rescued before someone gets scratched. Cats can



demonstrate what we have come to call a “short-circuit” between the “pet me” and “your hand is prey to be caught and eaten” parts of their brains, and can change suddenly from sweet to ferocious. Younger children often do not realize how strong they are and need to be coached on petting gently. Dogs and cats may not speak English, but they let us know their feelings as clearly as they can by sounds and the way they hold their bodies, ears and tail.

7. The dog is not allowed on the furniture when children are in the house.

In some houses, dogs are not allowed on the furniture at all. In any case, the dog needs to know that in the “pack order,” she comes after the humans. If the dog is allowed to sit on a couch or chair when children are playing on the floor, it sends the dog the message that they rank higher than the little people, and this can lead to undesirable behavior.

8. Give the dog treats when she does something (like “sit” or “come”), not just because she’s cute.

A treat or reward is just that – a reward. It has to be earned. The time to give a treat is when she does something you’ve asked, like Sit, Come, Lie Down, Shake Hands, Wait, Stay, or another command (but ask the dog’s person first). If she does not respond to a command, she may not know it. Some dogs have been trained with hand signals and do not understand voice commands.

9. The dog loves to play, and will chase a ball.



Games of throw and chase are outside activities. Limit ball tosses to a safe distance, and not into the street or somewhere you or the dog could get hurt going after it. The person must set the rules and time limits. You may get tired before the dog! The game needs to be stopped by the person if the dog gets rough or won’t give the toy back. Don’t try to wrestle the toy away!

10. If you bring any stuffed animals with you, keep them on your bed or someplace high, not on the floor where the dog can get them.

She may think an interesting toy left lying around is for her, and rip it apart or bury it. If she takes your toy, let an adult know. The way to handle this is to tell the dog firmly, “Drop it” or “Leave it.” You can hand the dog one of her own toys in exchange.



A final caution: when something happens that upsets a child or pet, adults need to intervene quickly. Sometimes it's "the dog stepped on our game and wrecked it," or "I wasn't doing *anything* and the cat reached out and scratched me." Then it's time to give your animals a break. Your dog may be over-stimulated by the activity, or want more attention – take her outside and play with her, take her for a walk, or give her a time-out in her quiet place. Your cat may want to just watch, but not be handled – let her go to a quiet area, or just sit together a safe distance from the activity.

Most important: during the visit, hold a clear picture in your own mind of your animals being calm. Stay calm yourself. Your animals will mirror your feelings – become anxious if you are, or protective of you if you get frazzled. It is up to you to model the behavior you want in your pets. During the visit, acknowledge the children and the animals when things are going well and they're behaving appropriately.

How the Rules Worked

Our younger visitors appreciate these guidelines, as do our animal companions. Protecting our pets' boundaries and teaching respect for them has successfully been demonstrated many times, as shown by these examples:

- Our Akita, Buki, withdrew to her dog house. A bit later I noticed the three youngest children were no longer playing with the others. I found them sitting quietly in a semicircle a respectful distance from the opening of the doghouse. The dog's bearlike head and front paws filled the entrance, and she seemed to be conveying ancient knowledge to her entranced students.
- As she neared her final days, Buki spent most of her time lying in her favorite spot outside. I told the children she was nearing the end of her time, and invited them to say quiet goodbyes. One at a time they went out, sat with her for a little while, and each gave her a flower. The image of this gentle, dignified dog with a smile on her face lying in the midst of a semicircle of flowers, brought tears to my eyes.
- After a couple of sanctuary-protected visits, Tyson, our senior cat, made a point of coming into the midst of family gatherings at least once. He went to each person to say hello, and then returned to his sanctuary. One of the children said in awe, "He used to didn't like me but now he let me pet him!"
- Our high-strung Australian shepherd, Katsina, found even her blanket-covered crate to be too open, but appreciates the sanctuary of the partially opened office door. I slip into her "cave within a cave" from time to time, to connect with her and reassure her that she is behaving well.

After the Visit

At close of the visit, praise the animals and the children for their good behavior.

The old saying, “good fences make good neighbors,” can be adapted to household animals and visitors as well. When the rules and expectations are clear, visits can be fulfilling and expansive experiences for everyone – even canine and feline family members.

