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2006: [M](#) [A](#) [M](#) [F](#) [J](#)2005: [D](#) [N](#) [O](#) [S](#) [A](#) [J](#) [J](#)

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Postpone Family Dog Until Kids Are School-Age: Experts

Study finds the bulk of bites occur among infants, toddlers

By **Kathleen Doheny**
HealthDay Reporter

MONDAY, March 6 (HealthDay News) -- Kids and dogs may seem like a perfect match, but a new study finds the family pooch is best introduced after children reach the age of 5.

The reason is simple: Toddlers are much more likely than older children to unknowingly aggravate dogs, who may then react as dogs do -- by biting.

"Our study showed that the number of attacks on children decreases with age and is highest at 1 year of age," said Dr. Johannes Schalamon, a co-author of the study and a physician in the department of pediatric surgery at the Medical University of Graz in Austria.

"Therefore I would recommend to supervise younger children more closely when they are in contact with a dog and postpone the purchase of a dog until children are of school age," Schalamon said.

Once a family is ready for a dog, parents might also want to pay close attention to the breed, the researchers said. They found that German Shepherds and Dobermans, in particular, were more likely to bite children than other breeds.

The study is published in the March issue of *Pediatrics*.

Schalamon's team reviewed the charts of 341 children aged 17 or under who sought medical attention in Austrian hospitals due to a dog bite between 1994 and 2003. Then they analyzed dog registers to count the canine population in the community by breed.

The likelihood of a child receiving a dog bite decreased with age, with children 1 year old and younger most likely to be bitten, the researchers found. In all, nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of the pediatric dog-bite cases occurred in children younger than 10. The risk of getting bitten by a German shepherd or a Doberman was more than five times higher than that of a Labrador retriever or a mixed-breed dog. Children were most likely to be bitten by dogs they knew -- their own pet or the pet of someone they knew.

Of the breeds in the registry, spaniels, Shi Tzu and Maltese were least likely to bite, the researchers said.

Fortunately, no children died, and 94 percent had injuries to just one body region -- usually the face, head and neck area. But 27 percent did require hospitalization, the researchers noted. More bites occurred in the summer months than other times of the year.

The report basically rings true for one emergency-room physician.

"Their findings I think are fairly accurate," said Dr. Kathleen Cowling, a spokeswoman for the American College of Emergency Physicians who works as an emergency doctor at Covenant HealthCare Emergency Care Center in Saginaw, Mich. She believes some of the findings would hold true in the United States, too.

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"But I disagree with the age 5" recommendation, she said. "Younger is OK, but parents need to be smart about it. Don't leave dogs and toddlers unattended. I think it is unrealistic to say, 'Don't have dogs until the kid is school age.' "

She pointed out that some couples get a dog before they have a child and are not eager to give the dog away when the baby arrives.

The location of the study might have had a bearing on results, as well, Cowling added. "In Europe in general, they are more liberal about taking dogs into business and about leashes," she said. Those attitudes could have upped the number of incidents.

Dr. Bernadine Cruz, a veterinarian in Laguna Hills, Calif., and a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association, said "the study has some very good points." She favors ages 5 to 7 as a good age range to introduce a dog into a family.

But she takes exception to ranking a dog's tendency to bite by breed. "To say that one breed is more prone to bite is inappropriate and inaccurate," she said. "Typically there are worse bites from bigger dogs just because they are stronger."

Smaller dogs can and do bite, as the study itself showed, she said. The researchers found that children younger than age 5 sustained more attacks from small dogs compared with the older children.

Some of the bites studied by the Austrian researchers involved behavior that could easily provoke a reaction, such as pulling the dog's tail or disturbing the dog while he is eating. Twenty-eight percent of bites happened when kids were "playing with/near the dog," the researchers noted.

On one point all experts agreed: Parents should teach their children how to handle a dog responsibly. Among the tips offered by the researchers: Let a dog sniff you before petting it. Do not run past dogs you don't know. Do not try to break up a dog fight.

More information

To learn more about how to pick a puppy, visit [Save Dogs and Kids](#) .

SOURCES: Johannes Schalamon, M.D., Department of Pediatric Surgery, Medical University of Graz, Graz, Austria; Kathleen Cowling, D.O., emergency room physician, Covenant HealthCare Emergency Care Center, Saginaw, Mich. and spokeswoman, American College of Emergency Physicians; Bernadine Cruz, D.V.M., veterinarian in Laguna Hills, Calif. and member of the American Veterinary Medical Association; March 2006, *Pediatrics*

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