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Lisa Savage — The truth about kids and dogs

Did you know that dog bites are most likely to occur in or around a child's home? And that the dog typically belongs to the family or someone close to the family?

As parents, we often let our guard down around familiar dogs, assuming that our kids are safe. But as I recently learned the hard way, this is a big mistake. Just over three weeks ago, our sweet shepherd/collie mix bit our son's cheek, missing his left eye by mere millimetres.

It was on a typical Saturday afternoon, except that our four-year-old son Thomas was overtired and, let's be perfectly honest, rather bratty because he went to bed late the night before.

My husband and I were tidying up while Thomas was playing in the next room. When my husband checked on him, he saw that Thomas had our dog Dave cornered and was hugging him forcefully.

Actually, it was more of a wrestler's headlock.

My husband opened his mouth to tell our son to stop, but before he could get a word out the dog bit Thomas's face.

At the hospital, the E.R. doctor said the wounds on Thomas's cheek were only superficial scratches, and with a precautionary round of antibiotics and lots of ointment, he would be fine.

I think this is partly why my husband didn't think we had to get rid of Dave.

He felt the bite was provoked and that, even though we had to take the situation very seriously, our pet hadn't suddenly turned into Cujo.

To me, it was a no-brainer.

My child was bitten and one just can't take a chance of that happening again to our son or to one of his playmates.

It was heartbreaking, but our dear dog would have to be put down. Somehow we had missed the signs and Dave was a danger.

When Thomas was born we watched the dog very carefully for signs of jealousy and never left the two alone together.

After two or three years without incident and seeing that our son was always gentle with the dog, we started to relax and stopped constantly supervising them.

That was a huge mistake. On their website, the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies says children should never be left unsupervised with ANY dog.

There are many good sources for information about dog bite prevention on the Internet and this is a common refrain.

Children, especially those under five or six, cannot be trusted to treat a dog gently and recognize a dog's warning signals.

No matter how many times you tell a child to be gentle or not to hug the dog, they probably won't remember.

If you don't believe it, just try telling a four-year-old to stop picking their nose and see how long it takes before they're doing it again.

Apart from constant supervision, there are many things you can do to reduce the likelihood of your child getting bitten by your dog.

First of all, have your pet spayed or neutered as it reduces aggression and behaviour problems.

Second, all dogs should go to obedience school and the whole family should participate.

The animal learns good behaviour, but just as importantly, the humans learn how to behave around the dog.

The number one rule to teach kids, according to Doggone Safe, a non-profit group dedicated to dog bite prevention, is not to hug a dog.

In the end, after a long conversation with our veterinarian, we decided to try keeping our dog.

Dave now lives in the family room. It's a big room at the far end of the house, so it's not a huge inconvenience for us and it's



Lisa's four-year-old son Thomas with Dave, the family dog.

comfortable for him.

The room contains the side door we use to come and go from the house and the television, so the dog isn't really isolated.

We let him out after Thomas goes to sleep and whenever my husband or I feel we can be fully attentive to the two of them.

When Thomas's playmates come over, Dave gets locked up in our bedroom — something he's already used to since some of the children are afraid of dogs.

I thought at first that living like this would be too stressful for us.

That the dog would feel neglected and we would be constantly fearful. But being very careful is now becoming routine and Dave still gets a lot of love and attention.

It's how it should have been all along.

For more information about keeping kids safe around dogs and other pets, check out these websites: www.doggoneseafe.com; www.cfhs.ca/athome; www.dogsandkids.ca.

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