



## **Dogs Are Like Swimming Pools**

By Jill Morstad

In every family with children and dogs, there should be a defined social hierarchy in which the children are above the dogs, and dogs not only are at the bottom of the social order, they know they are at the bottom. In addition, small children should never be alone with a dog, and parents have a responsibility to teach children how to act with dogs.

I have started telling parents that 'a dog is like a swimming pool.' Both a dog and a swimming pool have the power to significantly enhance our quality of life: They are sources of pleasure, entertainment, and enjoyment. For many people, a dog (or a swimming pool) is the final brushstroke on the portrait of success, rendering the family 'complete.'

So, with regard to dog and swimming pool, a couple of notes:

- 1) When we have a swimming pool, we fence our backyards to limit access and reduce our liability. A fence is required by law around swimming pools in most municipalities; that is likely to become the case for dogs as well if we don't wise up.
- 2) Parents know that when it comes to swimming pools, we have to do two things. We have to teach the children to swim AND we have to supervise them. Not one, or the other, but both and all the time.

Six weeks of swimming lessons for a three-year old (or a five-year-old or even a twelve-year-old) does not entitle the parent to exit poolside and head indoors to take a nap or watch the football game on TV... likewise, supervision is a poor substitute for an

extended formal education about how to be safe in and around the water. Knowing how to swim is an essential skill because knowing how to swim may save your life one day.

And so it is with dogs -- parents must train and supervise: They must train the dogs to be safe around children, AND they must train the children to be safe around dogs. And they must SUPERVISE, SUPERVISE, SUPERVISE. Not one, or the other, but both.

Oh, and one more thing: if your child cannot demonstrate swimming skills and knowledge of safety rules around the pool in your own backyard, will you trust that child to go off swimming at a neighbor's house, where it is not clear that either rules or supervision match your own?

To the parent who argued with me that it should be okay for her son to hug their family dog, wrestle with it on the floor, blow in its face and tug on its whiskers (dog was already snapping its teeth in kids' faces): if your child cannot demonstrate safety skills with respect to their own dog, will you trust your child in the home of a friend where the kids and dog in \*that\* household have not been trained or taught, nor supervised?

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Jill has been training dogs and teaching people to train their dogs since 1985, offering classes for local and regional dog clubs and in settings both public and private. Currently, she teaches the Kindergarten Puppy classes at the Capital Humane Society in Lincoln, Nebraska (where she also served on the board), and she is the adjunct/affiliate behaviorist for three Lincoln veterinary clinics.

Photo is of a well-supervised young child in the yard at George Hobson's Eastwood Kennels in Columbia Missouri in June 2005. Photographer: Patricia Perkins DVM.