

Child safety - children and animals

Many children love animals and enjoy close relationships and learning life lessons from their own pets. However, there are responsibilities and risks involved when children and animals are together.

It is important that children are taught the skills to behave safely around animals and to prevent and recognise any problems that may arise. You should:

- Teach children to always treat all animals gently and calmly. Never hurt, tease, frighten, surprise or corner an animal.
- Always closely supervise children near animals including pets. If this is not possible, then separate them.
- Separate children and animals including pets during noisy high-energy play, when food is present and when the animal or child is sleeping. Never disturb an animal that is eating or sleeping.
- Ask friends and relatives to do the same.
- Keep your pet healthy.
- Always wash your hands after touching animals, their food bowls, toys, bedding, etc.

Dogs

Most Australian households have pets. There is a proportion of children who are injured each year due to an incident with a dog. Children five years old or younger are most at risk and are most frequently bitten by their own or a friend's dog, usually in or around the home. Incidents are usually triggered by a child's interaction with the dog during play, eating or when the dog is sleeping.

Here are some things you can do to avoid incidents:

- Never approach a dog, even if it looks friendly. Always have your child ask you and the dog owner if they want to pat a dog.
- Pat dogs gently and calmly.
- Stand still if an unfamiliar dog approaches; don't run or scream.
- Never intervene between dogs that are fighting.

Choosing a dog

When choosing a dog to be part of your family, research what will be best for your lifestyle and environment. Training, socialising with adults, children and other animals, and keeping your dog healthy are essential.

For advice about choosing a dog and other information, call the Petcare Information and Advisory Service on 1800 631 784

What to do when a dog bites

If your child is bitten by a dog:

- Calm your child.
- If the skin has been broken, wash the area under cold running water.
- Apply an antiseptic and cover the bite with a clean dressing.
- Take the child to the doctor, as a tetanus booster and antibiotics may be necessary.
- If a piece of flesh has been bitten off, call an ambulance.

- Control the bleeding by applying firm pressure to the wound using a sterile dressing or clean cloth until the ambulance arrives.
- If your child is pale or drowsy, lie them down and raise their legs on a pillow or folded blanket.
- Do not give your child any food or water.

Cats

Cats make great pets and should be treated gently and responsibly:

- Injuries from cats are mainly bites or scratches commonly on the head, neck or upper extremity. Due to their sharp teeth and claws they commonly cause puncture wounds that may become infected. Cats have a lot of nasty bacteria on their teeth and claws.
- Any cat bites or scratches must be thoroughly washed and disinfected.
- Keep good hygiene by not allowing children access to litter trays or playing in garden beds that the cat uses for toileting.
- Keep cats out of a child's nursery so that they do not have access to the cot.

Birds

Parrot fever (*psittacosis*) is common in Australia. Symptoms are much the same as the flu with a very high temperature. People can and do catch it. Children have less resistance to parrot fever than adults, so children need to be careful when handling birds from the parrot family, including budgerigars. Children should always wash their hands after touching birds.

Snakes

While deaths from a snake bite are not very common in Australia, children should be taught the dangers of snakes and reptiles. Try to avoid walking through long grass and bushland when you have children with you. If you do, always wear safe clothing such as enclosed protective footwear and long trousers (preferably tucked into socks, as feet and ankles are often the first place on the body to be bitten).

If a snake or reptile does appear, do not handle or provoke it, because this is when many people are bitten. Try to remain as still as possible until the snake moves away.

Snake bite

If your child is bitten by a snake:

- Keep your child still and calm.
- Apply a pressure bandage and splint to the affected limb – the Australian Venom Research Unit has more information about the technique on its first aid pages.
- Get your child to the nearest hospital urgently.

Insects

Insects can sometimes be fascinating for children. Some children enjoy playing with and picking up insects. It is very important to teach your children that insects are not playthings, especially bees and wasps. More importantly, make sure that your child does not put insects in their mouth, to avoid infections and stinging.

Mosquito bites are very common among young children. As they are too young to be aware of this problem, it is most important to take precautions. If a child is playing outside, always put some kind of protective cream or sprays on their bodies to keep them from being bitten. Leave a t-shirt on them and don't allow them to play outside at night, as this is the time of day when mosquitoes are most prevalent. If you are travelling with children to a country where malaria is endemic, ask your doctor for advice.

Insect stings and bites

To reduce the risks of stings or bites:

- Teach children not to disturb or provoke venomous creatures, as they are likely to attack.
- Try to avoid walking through long grass and unsafe bushland when you have children with you.
- Dress children in closed-in shoes and long pants when in the bush and use insect repellents on children over 12 months.
- Soft drinks from a can or bottle should be drunk through a straw, as wasps and bees are attracted to the sweetness.
- Keep children away from insect nests. Contact your local council for help in removing the nest.
- If your child is known to be allergic to bees, wasps or ants, the child should wear a medical alert bracelet or pendant and have an anaphylaxis management plan.

If your child is stung or bitten

If a bee, wasp or ant stings your child:

- Keep your child still and calm.
- Remove bee stings immediately, as all the venom is injected within 30 seconds of a sting. Use a fingernail or the blunt edge of a knife in a flicking motion to remove the sting. Do not squeeze or dig into the skin.
- Bees leave a sting, wasps do not.
- Wrap ice in a wet cloth and place it on the stung area.
- If pain and swelling persist, take the child to a doctor.

Allergic reaction

Some children have an allergic reaction to bee, wasp or ant stings. This may result in breathing difficulties and can be life threatening. A child can have a severe and sudden allergic reaction to an allergen – this is called anaphylaxis.

If you know a child to be allergic to stings, make sure they wear a medical alert bracelet or pendant and always carry prescribed medication.

If an allergic reaction occurs you should:

- Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance.
- If the child has medication for an allergic reaction, give it to them immediately.
- Stay calm and keep the child still.
- Put a pressure bandage and splint over the bite area.

All licensed children's services and schools in Victoria are required to have an anaphylaxis management policy in place. More information is available through the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, dial triple zero (000) for an ambulance
- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Safety Centre, Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- Petcare Information and Advisory Service – for help in choosing a pet that suits your situation.
- Australian Venom Research Unit, Department of Pharmacology, University of Melbourne Tel. 1300 760 451
- Anaphylaxis Australia Tel. 1300 728 000
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 - seven days a week, 24 hours a day - for advice about poisonings, suspected poisonings, bites and stings, mistakes with medicines and poisoning prevention advice.

Things to remember

- While animals can be fun, they can also be dangerous.
- Always supervise your child around any animal.
- Teach your children to play safely with pets and to avoid or respond to danger signs.
- Know what to do in case of an emergency.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Childrens Hospital - Safety Centre

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