- Pets / Child care

BALANCING PET LOVE WITH CHILD SAFETY

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Fur babies have been credited with improving people's mental health—pet owners are happier, more relaxed, and less lonely in the company of their pets.



The perks of having a pet extend to one's children, too. Growing up with a dog or a cat at home develops their sense of compassion, patience, and unconditional love.

And yet, even as you treat pets as members of the family, they're still animals prone to certain moods and behaviors. Forcing pets to do something they don't want to do or even patting them innocently on the head when they're asleep, eating, or cranky may elicit scratches or bites—accidents parents shouldn't take lightly, even if the pets are vaccinated.

"When your child is bitten or scratched by a pet, time is of the essence," says Dr. Amado A. Flores III of the Emergency Department of Makati Medical Center (MakatiMed).

"Wash the wound with soap and clean running water for 10 to 15 minutes, apply an antiseptic on the wound, cover it with a sterile bandage. Bring your child to the ER immediately if the wound is swollen, doesn't stop bleeding, and is so severe it shows bones, muscles, and tendons. Otherwise, make sure you're at the hospital no later than eight hours after the bite. The longer you wait, the more you put your child at risk for infection and possible complications."

At the hospital, be prepared to answer questions about the animal that scratched or bit your child.

"Has the pet had its rabies shots, or is its vaccination status unknown? Was it behaving strangely?" says Flores. "Ideally, you'll have to quarantine the animal to observe it for 10 days. Whether the dog or cat becomes ill or not, we strongly recommend a series of antirabies shots on your child."

Postexposure shots consist of four rabies vaccine doses given on Days 0, 3, 7, and 14 (plus a fifth dose on Day 28 if the patient is immunocompromised), and a single dose of human rabies immune globulin (HRIG). The HRIG is administered as soon as possible after exposure to provide immediate, passive immunity, while the vaccine
stimulates the body to produce its own antibodies that protect against the rabies virus.

For subsequent exposures, those who have been previously vaccinated do not need HRIG and would typically receive two booster doses of the rabies vaccine, one on Day 0 and a second on Day 3.

A critical issue in the Philippines, rabies cases numbered 354 from January to September 2024, a 23-percent jump from the previous year, according to the Department of Health.
"Rabies is a fatal disease. But it's also very preventable," shares Flores. "Keep your pets' vaccinations up to date, and teach your kids to respect dogs and cats, and all kinds of animals. Don't bother them when they're eating or sleeping; don't run away or toward an unfamiliar dog or cat; never reach for a dog or cat from a gate or fence; and keep your child away from an animal once it starts to show signs of aggression."
A pet with complete shots doesn't necessarily mean your child is in the clear. "Dog and cat bites and scratches can transmit bacteria to the wound," warns Flores. "Capnocytophaga and Pasteurella multocida from dog bites can lead to fever, diarrhea, swollen joints, and blisters or pus on the wound. The same symptoms have also been observed in Pasteurella multocida, Staphylococcus aureus, and Campylobacteriosis—bacteria found in the saliva of cats. Treatment for such conditions include antibiotics or a tetanus shot."
A child who grows up with pets will surely have countless memories of bonding with a furry, four-legged family member.
"When you spend time in close contact with dogs or cats, scratches and bites are both avoidable and inevitable," says Flores. "Be steps ahead: Have your pets vaccinated regularly, remind your children to be gentle with a dog or cat, and act quickly in the event of a scratch or bite."