

The Safety Zone

by Barbara Shumannfang Author of [Happy Kids, Happy Dogs](#)

Every dog, no matter how docile, needs an indoor spot that will allow him to relax undisturbed by children. Every child, no matter how at ease around dogs, needs to learn to respect a dog's personal space. When a dog is in the Safety Zone, children may not look at or interact with him or her. Using the Safety Zone correctly means greater safety for your child and his or her playmates, and more peace for everyone when it's time for a break.

Where to set up the Safety Zone

Choose a room such that your dog can still smell and hear many household activities, but without being in the thick of things. Provide fresh water, meals, edible toys and comfy bedding for your dog in the Safety Zone. The Safety Zone can be created with:

1. A baby gate. This option allows you to confine your dog to a low-traffic room adjacent to family activity (like the dining room). Nowadays gates come in all heights and lengths.
2. A crate. If your dog is already house-trained, consider using a larger crate for extra space and comfort.
3. An exercise pen ('x-pen' for short). It has panels so that you can fold it up to carry or store.

When to introduce and use the Safety Zone

If you're expecting a baby, start using the Safety Zone a few times daily no later than four weeks before the baby's arrival. If you already have kids, or if kids visit your home, introduce the Safety Zone right away.

Despite what you may have heard, supervision does not prevent dog bites to children. You must be a kid canine coach, which means you actively promote and reward good behavior by your child and your dog (for how to do this for infants through teenagers see *Happy Kids, Happy Dogs*). Any time you cannot coach your dog and child through their interactions, use the Safety Zone. Examples:

- company comes over and things are a bit exciting
- you are too busy or too tired to be an effective coach
- your child's playmates are visiting
- you're not home
- you have a babysitter or housekeeper over, or
- front-door traffic might pose an opportunity for doggie escape.

As long as you continue to meet your dog's daily needs for aerobic exercise, affection, and training, there is no need to feel guilty about using the Safety Zone. It provides an important break for your dog.

How to teach your dog to love the Safety Zone

1. Feed your dog all her meals in the Safety Zone using food-dispensing toys like Kong or Busy Buddy.
2. Between meals, when your dog is not watching, sprinkle a few outrageously good treats in the Safety Zone. Let her find the treats as a surprise in her own good time.
3. After a day or two of sprinkling surprise treats, introduce short periods with the baby gate or crate door closed using the following plan:

Offer your pooch her favorite edible toy in the Safety Zone, then go take a shower, pay the bills, or check the mail. Start with five minute long activities, gradually increasing the time your dog is confined each

time you practice. If your dog has been anxious about separation from you in the past, sit in a chair near the Safety Zone while she eats and read a magazine. At each of your dog's meals, position your chair another three inches further from the Safety Zone until you are out of sight while she eats.

Secrets to successful Safety Zone use

How to prevent your dog from barking or whining while in the Safety Zone:

- Provide your dog with plenty of aerobic exercise each day. A tired dog is generally a calmer dog.
- Always provide safe, edible chew toys in the Safety Zone, such as stuffed Kongs.
- Choose a spot for the Safety Zone near family activities and near your sleeping area at night. Dogs are social creatures and should not be isolated.
- If you're using a crate, cover most of it with a light sheet or towel from the start (allow air flow).
- Ignore whining or it will escalate. A much more effective strategy is to prevent it to begin with by following the above plan closely.

How to get your dog to go into the Safety Zone on your verbal cue:

1. Stand about two feet from the Safety Zone with your dog, facing the entrance together. Hold your dog by the collar.
2. Continue holding her by the collar and let her see you toss a tidbit into the Safety Zone. Pause so she strains forward a bit, thinking, "I really want to go in there!"
3. Then release the collar and let her go. Just as she surges toward the Safety Zone, give a verbal cue like "nap time!" said just once.
4. She will hop into the Safety Zone and get the treat. Praise and encourage her to come back out to you.
5. Do this five to six times in quick succession.
6. Feed her meals like this for a couple of days, tossing in a handful of food at a time in lieu of a treat, and she'll soon have the idea.
7. Then switch to first saying the verbal cue "nap time!" then releasing the collar, then feeding the treats to your dog once she's moved into the Safety Zone. Now she's got the hang of going in on verbal cue.
8. If you gradually increase your starting distance each time you cue "nap time," you won't need to stand near the Safety Zone to get your dog to go in on cue. This is very handy if you need to quickly get your dog out from underfoot, or to move him or her away from your child.

For easy-to-follow tips on how to be an effective kid canine coach from pregnancy through a child's teenage years, see the book *Happy Kids, Happy Dogs: Building a Friendship Right from the Start* by Barbara Shumannfang. *Happy Kids, Happy Dogs* is recommended by childbirth educators, pediatricians, veterinarians and trauma prevention specialists, and was honored with a nomination for Best Dog Training and Behavior Book (2006) by the Dog Writers Association of America. It is available wherever books are sold.