



THE COMPLETE GUIDE

6 Games to Stop Dog-Child Nipping

A Behaviourist's Protocol for Families

Magic Hand · Find It · Recall Game · Freeze Tag · Settle on a Mat · Eyes on Me

A 6-week, root-cause behaviour modification protocol for families.

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Introduction

Who This Guide Is For

This guide is for parents who have:

- A dog that nips, mouths, or bites at children's hands
- A child who wants to interact with the dog but is at risk
- Tried yelling, pushing away, or separating them — and nothing worked
- A dog with high energy, high prey drive, or herding instincts

What This Guide Is Not

This is not a quick fix. This is not a list of tricks. This is a behaviour modification protocol that addresses the root causes of nipping:

Root Cause	Which Game Fixes It
Dog sees hands as bite targets	Magic Hand, Eyes on Me
Dog's mouth goes to hands out of habit	Find It
Dog doesn't trust children approaching	Recall Game
Dog's arousal escalates with movement	Freeze Tag
Dog has no alternative behaviour when aroused	Settle on a Mat
Dog focuses on hands instead of faces	Eyes on Me

The Philosophy Behind This Guide

Nipping is not dominance. Nipping is not aggression. Nipping is a communication breakdown.

Your dog is trying to interact with your child. Their only tool is their mouth. These games teach them a different way.



Part 1: Safety First

The Non-Negotiable Rules for Parents

Rule	Why
Never leave a dog and child unsupervised	Even the most patient dog has limits
Create a dog-only safe zone	A crate, bed, or gated area where children are never allowed
Learn stress signals	Whale eye, lip licking, yawning, tucked tail, flattened ears, freezing
Never punish a growl	Growling is a warning. Punish it, and the dog skips the warning next time
Stop if the dog breaks skin	This is a Level 3 bite. Consult a force-free behaviourist immediately

Stress Signals Chart (Teach Your Children)

Signal	What It Looks Like	What It Means
Whale Eye	Showing whites of eyes while looking away	"I'm uncomfortable"
Lip Licking	Licking nose when no food is present	"I'm stressed"
Yawning	Yawning when not tired	"I'm anxious"
Tucked Tail	Tail between legs	"I'm scared"
Flattened Ears	Ears pinned back	"I'm worried"
Turning Away	Head or body turns away	"I need space"
Freezing	Goes completely still	"I'm about to react"
Growling	Low rumble	"Back off" — never punish

If you see ANY of these — separate the child and dog immediately.



Part 2: The 6 Games

GAME 1: MAGIC HAND

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

The dog has learned that hands are bite targets. Every time a hand moves, the dog's mouth follows. This game rewires that association.

The Science

This is counter-conditioning. The dog has a conditioned emotional response to hands (excitement → mouthing). We replace it with a new association (hands = calm → treat).

What You Need

- High-value treats (pea-sized)
- A calm environment
- A child with a closed fist

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Place a treat in the child's palm. Close the fist completely.	—
2	Child holds out the closed fist at the dog's nose level. Stay still.	Hand is neutral
3	Dog sniffs, licks, paws, or mouths. Child stays still.	Mouthing does not work
4	The moment the dog pulls back, looks away, or stops mouthing — open the fist.	Calm = reward
5	Let the dog take the treat gently from the open palm.	Gentle taking = reward
6	Repeat 5 times per session.	Hands predict good things

Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Keep the fist closed tight	Don't let the dog pry it open
Stay completely still	Don't pull away or flinch
Open the fist only when the dog is calm	Don't reward mouthing
Use an open palm to give the treat	Don't drop the treat on the floor



Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog aggressively mouths the fist	Start with an open palm. Let the dog take the treat. Then close the fist halfway. Gradually close more.
Dog gives up and walks away	Use a higher-value treat. Try before meals.
Dog paws at the hand	Wait for the pause. Open the fist the moment the paw stops.
Dog jumps on the child	Child freezes. Restart with the dog in a sit.

Progression

Level	Task
1	Closed fist with treat. Open when dog stops mouthing.
2	Closed fist. Dog must sit before opening.
3	Child stands. Dog must sit and wait.
4	Child walks past the dog with a closed fist. Dog stays calm = treat.



GAME 2: FIND IT

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

The dog's mouth goes to hands because hands are the most interesting thing in the environment. This game makes the ground more interesting than hands.

The Science

This is Differential Reinforcement of an Incompatible Behaviour (DRI). The dog cannot sniff the ground and mouth a hand at the same time. Additionally, sniffing activates the parasympathetic nervous system — it lowers heart rate and calms the dog.

What You Need

- High-value treats
- A clear floor space
- A child who can toss treats

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Dog stands 1-2 feet from the child.	—
2	Child says "Find it!" and tosses a treat on the ground near their feet.	"Find it" predicts treat on ground
3	Dog sniffs and eats the treat. Child stays still.	Sniffing = reward
4	While the dog is sniffing, child takes one small step back.	Child moving = not a chase trigger
5	Child repeats "Find it!" and tosses another treat.	Pattern continues
6	Repeat 5-10 times per session.	Mouth goes to ground, not hands

Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Toss the treat on the ground	Don't hand the treat to the dog
Stay still while the dog sniffs	Don't point at the treat
Step back slowly	Don't step back quickly
Wait until the dog eats the first treat	Don't toss a second treat too soon



Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog ignores the treat and mouths	Use a higher-value treat. Exercise the dog first.
Dog sniffs then returns to hands	Toss treats more frequently. Keep the nose busy.
Dog eats too quickly and looks for more	Toss treats in different directions.
Child is afraid to toss	Practice without the dog first.

Progression

Level	Task
1	Toss treats in a 2-foot radius.
2	Toss treats in a 5-foot radius.
3	Toss treats behind the dog.
4	Hide treats before the dog enters. Say "Find it!"

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GAME 3: RECALL GAME

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

The dog does not see children as safe to approach. Children are either unpredictable or something to chase. This game flips the association.

The Science

This is positive reinforcement and classical conditioning. The dog learns that approaching a child predicts a treat. The child becomes a conditioned stimulus for good things.

What You Need

- High-value treats
- A 5-10 foot clear space
- A child
- A parent nearby

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Child stands 3 feet from the dog.	—
2	Child says the dog's name in a happy voice, then "Come!"	Name + "Come" = approach child
3	Child opens arms slightly. Does not reach for the dog.	Child is inviting, not grabbing
4	Dog comes. Child holds out an open palm with a treat.	Coming to child = reward
5	Dog takes the treat. Child praises softly.	Gentle taking = praise
6	Child takes one small step back and repeats.	Pattern continues

The Golden Rule

The child NEVER reaches for the dog. The dog always comes to the child. The child never goes to the dog.



Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Call once and wait	Don't repeat the command
Hold out an open palm	Don't grab the dog's collar or face
Let the dog come to you	Don't reach for the dog
Praise softly	Don't get overly excited

Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog ignores the child	Use a higher-value treat. Have a parent model first.
Dog comes but runs away after eating	Toss multiple treats one at a time. Dog stays longer.
Dog jumps on the child	Child freezes. Tucks hands away. Waits for 4 paws on ground.
Child is scared to call	Parent stands next to child. Parent calls first, then child calls when dog is halfway.

Progression

Level	Task
1	Child stands still, calls from 3 feet.
2	Child calls from across the room.
3	Child calls while dog is eating.
4	Child calls while dog is sniffing outside.
5	Child calls while dog is playing with a toy.
6	Child moves while calling.



GAME 4: FREEZE TAG

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

Dogs nip children because children move in unpredictable, fast, erratic patterns. To a dog with prey drive, a running child = a squirrel. This game teaches the dog that movement is controlled by the child, not by the dog's arousal.

The Science

This is based on Premack's Principle — a high-probability behaviour (chasing) is used to reinforce a low-probability behaviour (freezing). The child moving is the reward. The child freezing is the price the dog pays to get the reward again.

What You Need

- A child who understands "freeze"
- A dog on a leash (held by a parent)
- High-value treats
- A small, enclosed space

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Child walks slowly. Dog watches from 10 feet away, leashed.	Child moving = neutral
2	The moment the dog shows excitement (ears forward, body tense), child FREEZES.	Excitement = game stops
3	Wait. Do not move. Do not speak.	Stillness = boring
4	The moment the dog looks away, sniffs, or relaxes — child moves again.	Calm = game restarts
5	Repeat 5-6 times.	Movement is controlled by MY behaviour
6	Gradually decrease distance.	I can be close and calm

Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Freeze the moment the dog gets excited	Don't scream or run
Stand still like a statue	Don't make eye contact while frozen
Wait for the dog to look away	Don't reach for the dog



Do	Don't
Resume walking only when the dog is calm	Don't tease the dog by almost moving

Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog gets more excited when child freezes	Child should freeze AND turn away. Remove eye contact.
Dog barks at the frozen child	Wait longer. Do not move until the dog is completely quiet.
Dog loses interest	Use a toy or treat to reward when the child moves again.
Child is scared to freeze near the dog	Start with the dog behind a baby gate.

Progression

Level	Child's Movement	Dog's Position
1	Walks slowly in a circle	Leashed, 10 feet away
2	Walks slowly	Leashed, 5 feet away
3	Walks normally	Leashed, 5 feet away
4	Walks normally	Off-leash, 5 feet away
5	Walks, stops, starts, changes direction	Off-leash, 3 feet away
6	Runs and stops suddenly	Off-leash, 5 feet away



GAME 5: SETTLE ON A MAT

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

Most nipping happens when the dog is aroused and has nothing else to do. The dog is bored, the children are playing, and the dog's only tool for interaction is their mouth. This game teaches the dog: when children are playing, I have a job. My job is to settle on my mat and watch.

The Science

This is based on Behavioural Momentum and Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible Behaviour (DRI). The dog cannot nip and settle at the same time. By reinforcing the settle, you replace the nip with a behaviour that makes nipping physically impossible. Additionally, the mat becomes a conditioned stimulus for calm through repeated pairing with treats.

What You Need

- A specific mat, bed, or towel (always the same one)
- High-value treats
- A child who can play independently
- A dog on a leash (initially)

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Place the mat on the floor. Toss a treat on it.	Mat = good things
2	Repeat 10 times.	Mat predicts treats
3	Say "Mat" and point. Dog steps on it = reward.	"Mat" = go to mat
4	Reward for standing, then sitting, then lying down.	Mat = place to be calm
5	Add duration. Reward every 5 seconds of lying down.	Mat = stay calm
6	Child plays quietly 10 feet away. Reward dog for staying.	Child playing = I stay on mat
7	Decrease distance. Reward dog for staying.	Child near me = I stay on mat
8	Child plays normally. Reward dog for staying.	Chaos = I stay on mat
9	Dog chooses the mat on their own.	Mat = my safe place



Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Play normally near the mat	Don't call the dog off the mat
Ignore the dog when on the mat	Don't throw toys toward the mat
Let the dog choose the mat	Don't force the dog onto the mat
Reward with a treat toss if the dog stays	Don't pet the dog while settling

Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog gets up when child moves	Increase treat value. Reward more frequently. Decrease distance.
Dog stares at the child while on the mat	Reward the dog for looking AWAY from the child.
Dog whines on the mat	The mat is not yet positive. Go back to Step 1.
Dog eats the treat and gets up	Reward WHILE the dog is lying down.
Child feels ignored	Explain the dog is "working." Child can reward calm behavior.

Progression

Level	Child's Activity	Dog's Position	Reward Frequency
1	Sits quietly	On mat, 10 feet away	Every 5 seconds
2	Plays with toy quietly	On mat, 10 feet away	Every 10 seconds
3	Plays normally	On mat, 10 feet away	Every 30 seconds
4	Plays normally	On mat, 5 feet away	Every 30 seconds
5	Runs and laughs	On mat, 5 feet away	Every 60 seconds
6	Runs and laughs	Chooses mat independently	Intermittent



GAME 6: EYES ON ME

The Behavioural Problem It Solves

Dogs nip because they look at the child's hands as the point of interaction. The hands are moving, the hands have toys, the hands are the fun. This game teaches the dog: the child's eyes are the point of interaction, not their hands.

The Science

This is based on Attention Control Training and Differential Reinforcement of an Alternative Behaviour (DRA). The dog learns that looking at the child's face earns reinforcement. This creates a default behaviour of orienting to the face rather than the hands. When the dog is looking at the child's face, they cannot be watching the hands for an opportunity to nip.

What You Need

- High-value treats
- A child who can hold a treat at eye level
- A quiet environment

Step-by-Step

Step	What To Do	What The Dog Learns
1	Child holds a treat at their own eye level.	Treats come from the face
2	Wait. Do not speak. Do not move the treat.	The hand is not the source
3	Dog makes eye contact = say "Yes!" and give treat.	Looking at eyes = reward
4	Repeat 10 times.	Eye contact is the behaviour that works
5	Add cue: "Eyes!" before holding the treat up.	"Eyes" = look at my face
6	Add duration: reward for 2 seconds, then 3, then 5.	Eye contact = stay focused
7	Add movement: child takes one step. Reward eye contact.	I can focus even when child moves
8	Add toy: child holds toy in one hand, treat at eye level.	Face is more important than toy
9	Add name: child says dog's name, then "Eyes!"	Name = look at face
10	Practice before other games. Dog checks in before release.	Eye contact = permission to play



Rules for Children

Do	Don't
Hold treat at YOUR eye level	Don't hold at dog's nose level
Wait for the dog to look at YOUR eyes	Don't wave the treat around
Reward calmly	Don't get excited and break focus
Keep sessions short	Don't do more than 10 reps

Troubleshooting

Problem	Solution
Dog stares at the treat, not eyes	Hold treat BEHIND your head. Dog must look at face.
Dog jumps up	Lower treat to chest level. Reward any eye contact.
Dog loses interest	Use higher-value treat. Do 5 reps and stop.
Dog looks at eyes then immediately at hands	Reward BEFORE the dog looks away.
Dog only doing it for the treat	Fade the treat. Reward every other eye contact.

Progression

Level	Child's Action	Dog's Task	Duration
1	Holds treat at eye level	Look at eyes	1 second
2	Holds treat at eye level	Look at eyes	3 seconds
3	Holds treat at eye level	Look at eyes	5 seconds
4	Takes one step	Maintain eye contact	3 seconds
5	Holds toy in one hand	Look at eyes, ignore toy	3 seconds
6	Bounces a ball	Look at eyes, ignore ball	5 seconds
7	Another child plays nearby	Look at eyes, ignore distraction	5 seconds



Part 3: The 6-Week Protocol

Weekly Schedule

Week	Focus	Games	Daily Time
1	Foundation	Magic Hand + Find It	5 min each
2	Foundation	Recall Game + Magic Hand	5 min each
3	Arousal Control	Freeze Tag (Levels 1-3)	5 min
4	Alternative Behaviour	Settle on a Mat (Levels 1-4)	5 min
5	Focus Shift	Eyes on Me (Levels 1-5)	5 min
6	Integration	All 6 games, rotating	10-15 min

Daily Rotation (Week 6 Example)

Day	Game 1	Game 2	Game 3
Monday	Magic Hand	Find It	Settle on a Mat
Tuesday	Recall Game	Freeze Tag	Eyes on Me
Wednesday	Magic Hand	Settle on a Mat	Eyes on Me
Thursday	Find It	Freeze Tag	Recall Game
Friday	All 6 games (2 min each)	—	—
Saturday	Rest	—	—
Sunday	Rest	—	—



Part 4: The Do's and Don'ts of Dog-Child Play

The Do's

#	Do This	Why
1	Supervise all interactions	Safety first
2	Teach "Be a Tree"	Stops the game without punishment
3	Create a dog-only safe zone	Prevents feeling trapped
4	Reward calm behavior	Reinforces what you want
5	Keep sessions short	Prevents over-arousal
6	Use treats to redirect	Interrupts behavior without yelling
7	Teach slow movements	Prevents prey drive trigger
8	Give the dog a job	Prevents boredom nipping
9	Model calm behavior	Children learn by watching
10	End on a positive note	Keeps the dog wanting more

The Don'ts

#	Don't Do This	Why It Backfires
1	Don't let children grab the face, ears, or tail	Invades personal space
2	Don't let children take toys or food	Triggers resource guarding
3	Don't punish growling	Removes the warning
4	Don't let children hug tightly	Feels like restraint
5	Don't let children kiss the dog's face	Puts face in bite zone
6	Don't let children chase the dog	Triggers fight-or-flight
7	Don't let the dog chase children	#1 cause of nipping
8	Don't allow play during eating or sleeping	Startle response
9	Don't let children pick up small dogs roughly	Fragile and defensive
10	Don't ignore stress signals	Leads to escalation



Part 5: Quick Reference Cards

For Parents (Print and Hang)

The 6 Games

1. Magic Hand — Fist with treat. Open when calm.
2. Find It — Toss treats on ground. Dog sniffs.
3. Recall Game — Call dog. Reward when they come.
4. Freeze Tag — Child freezes when dog gets excited.
5. Settle on a Mat — Dog learns to settle during chaos.
6. Eyes on Me — Dog looks at faces, not hands.

The Golden Rules

- Never leave dog and child unsupervised
- Never punish a growl
- Create a dog-only safe zone
- Learn stress signals
- End on a positive note

For Children (Print and Hang)

The 3 Rules

1. Be a Tree — Freeze if the dog gets too excited
2. No Grabbing — Never grab the dog's face or collar
3. Low and Slow — Move slowly around the dog

Stress Signals to Watch For

- Whale eye (showing whites of eyes)
- Lip licking (when no food)
- Yawning (when not tired)
- Tucked tail
- Flattened ears
- Turning away
- Freezing
- Growling

If you see ANY of these — tell an adult immediately.



Part 6: When to Seek Professional Help

Red Flags

Red Flag	Why It's Serious
Dog has broken skin (even once)	Level 3 bite — professional intervention required
Dog growls or snarls when approached	Warning that could escalate
Dog guards resources (food, toys, people)	Leading cause of bites
Dog has a bite history with children	Safety must come first
Dog shows stiff body language or staring	Precursor to a bite
Child is fearful of the dog	Fear makes behavior unpredictable

Part 7: The Final Word

What Success Looks Like

Timeline	What You'll See
Week 1	Dog is confused. Mouthing continues.
Week 2	Dog starts offering calm behavior. Less mouthing.
Week 3	Dog understands the games. Noticeable reduction.
Week 4	Dog shows calm behavior automatically.
Week 5	Children and dog can be in the same room safely.
Week 6	Dog chooses calm behavior without prompting.

The Mindset Shift

You are not training your dog to stop nipping. You are training your dog to do something else instead.

Nipping is not the problem. Nipping is the symptom. The problem is:

- Lack of alternative behaviour
- Lack of arousal control
- Lack of appropriate focus

These six games address all three.



The Final Rule

Consistency beats intensity. Five minutes a day, every day, will change your dog's behaviour faster than one hour on the weekend.

End every session on a win. Even if the dog only did one thing right, reward it and stop. This keeps the dog wanting to play again.

This guide is for educational purposes. If your dog has a bite history or shows aggression, consult a qualified, force-free behaviourist before implementing any of these games. Safety for your child and your dog is the priority.

