

Nightmare at Christmas!

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The festive season. Time for family fun, smiles and laughter. Singing round the tree and perfect presents for everyone. Delicious food and a chance to relax with your loved ones.

Or... reality!

Stress, stress and more stress. The kids are tired from a long school term, the phone is ringing constantly, you are rushing about fighting your way through crowded shops, trying to make ends meet and not thinking about the debt you'll have to pay off in the new year. Then, on the big day when all you want to do is slump into the nearest armchair, you are meant to put up with your extended family descending on you in droves, pretending to be thrilled with their 'interesting' gifts and preventing Aunt Marge from falling out with Gran over the cranberry sauce. Bah humbug!

Frankly, if this roughly describes your family Christmas, how on earth we expect our dogs to behave impeccably is close to ridiculous! It's no wonder that my office phone rings off the hook in January, with all the many behaviour 'crises' that the holiday season has brought to a head.

Here are my top tips for surviving Christmas with your dog's sanity intact. I'm afraid your family is down to you!

Food fights

We all know the perils of eating too much at Christmas, but the consequences for your pet can be far worse than just having to go on a diet in January. Many of the treats that we like so much are toxic for dogs – we all know about chocolate and raisins for example, but there are plenty of other items that your dog would just love to steal which will find you rushing down to the vets during emergency hours. Of course, the most obvious of these is the turkey itself! Many a tale of family lunches ruined come to our ears after the festive season – not only by the fact that the dog ate the turkey lock, stock and trimmings, but also that the dog proceeded to have a stomach upset of the most violent and unpleasant nature following the best theft of his life! Keeping food out of the way of your dog seems like such an easy piece of advice, but frankly, unless you have eyes in the back of your head, I would strongly recommend that you keep your dog out of the way of the food! Unless your family are very obedient, the easiest way to do this is probably using a baby gate on the kitchen door – but giving your dog a calm and quite 'base' in another room altogether can also be a sensible plan, especially if you have lots of visitors coming to the house who may not understand the speed and stealth of the average dog with a turkey dinner in his sights.

Beware too of all the other items that you need to keep out of reach of your dog over the holiday season. Edible tree decorations are obvious, but how about the after-party paracetamol? Non dog-owning visitors also put plates, cups, glasses and all sorts of other goodies on the floor, never thinking of the consequences of what happens when the dog eats or drinks the remnants of their festive fare. Trying to remove bones or pieces of tin foil from the throat of any reluctant dog is challenge enough, but do this in the presence of screaming children, or slightly boozy relatives, is a recipe for being bitten. Remember, keep the dog out of temptation!

Happy families

Over-excited, over-tired, over-wrought and all over the dog! Kids love Christmas, and bearing in mind that the patience of even the most tolerant parent can sometimes be tested to the limit at this time of year, do make sure that your dog isn't tested too. Many dogs that usually live happily with children may find the levels of noise, stress and excitement just too much at Christmas, with nightmare consequences which go on and on. Allowing your dog to become irritable with the kids is bad enough, but allowing them to be pushed to the point where they snap or even bite will leave you with serious trust issues that may never be resolved. Make sure you provide your dog with a safety zone where the kids cannot reach him. This could be a quiet room, behind a baby gate, in a crate, or even in your car if necessary. Bear in mind that no matter how much you love having your dog in the midst of a family party, if he isn't enjoying it, it will end in tears. Indeed, if your dog isn't used to children, and you have lots visiting, I would even go so far as to suggest that you give him a complete holiday by sending him to stay with child-free friends or booking him into kennels for a couple of days. Whatever happens, don't risk incidents with kids and dogs – especially at a time when you might be distracted or less intensive in your supervision.

Festive madness

There's little doubt about it, we all behave a bit odd around Christmas time. Whether through stress, excitement, the effects of one too many glasses of sherry, or whatever, to our dogs it must appear that we have gone slightly mad! How many other times of the year does your dog see you sitting on the floor amidst a mountain of wrapping paper, shouting at other people (playing board games, of course!), dancing or singing? In order to help your dog cope with this, trying to maintain some sort of routine is essential. Giving your dog the same food that he usually has, at the same time, may seem a little dull, but will ensure that his digestion stays calm, even if the rest of the household is not! Exercise too often gets overlooked at this time of year, and it can really help to give your dog some time out as well as a chance to let off some steam. Of course, if you can persuade the whole family to come, that's even better!

Christmas presence

Sadly, it's not unheard of for dogs which live happily together all year to have a major scuffle on Christmas day! An increase in tension in the household, the proximity of delicious food, less space, more people, and a break in the usual routine are all contributory factors. However, there is one other major cause of fights between dogs at Christmas - presents! Of course, we all want to treat our dogs by buying them fun toys, chews or other goodies, and mine are no exception. Indeed, there's nothing they love more than ripping off the wrapping paper and discovering what's inside. However, just like kids, no sooner have they done this than they turn around to see what everyone else has got. It doesn't matter whether they all have the same thing or not, at some stage they will all swap, or one will try to grab the other's, and this can cause – excuse the pun – a real bone of contention! In order to achieve peace and goodwill between dogs on Christmas day, bear in mind that dogs often need space between them to feel relaxed with a new possession. They need time to enjoy it and maybe let the novelty wear off a little. Finally, they need to know that humans are in control. If you suspect that a case of present-grabbing is likely to occur, manage it with supervision and leads to keep the dogs at respectful distances – remember, it's better safe than sorry if you want a truly happy Christmas!