

Sink Your Teeth into Preventing Dog Bites

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Puppies mouth and nip on us because they have poor bite inhibition, they are teething, and they are exploring the world with their mouths wide open, chomping their way through life like little PacMen®. They just don't know how tender human skin is. We'll help you teach your puppy to inhibit the force of his jaws.

Outside the scope of normal puppy mouthing, dog bites – even if they don't break skin – should be considered very serious. At this point in your puppy's development, ***you now have the only opportunity you'll ever have to prevent these behaviors.*** You must dog-proof your children (and yourself) and childproof your dog.

Dogs biting or acting aggressively is not a happy topic. In spite of the horrible attacks we read about or see on TV, the truth of the matter is that ***the percentage of children hurt by their parents is astronomical compared to dogs hurting children.*** We also know for certain that there is a link between animal abuse and child abuse. Humane organizations are educating schools, law enforcement, medical professionals such as veterinarians and pediatricians and social and mental health workers on how to recognize and respond to the human/animal abuse link.

It is surprising that dogs do as well as they do with us. We have a lot of goofy ideas about training dogs and disciplining them for things they do not know.

Why *do* dogs bite? Because they are dogs. Dogs become agitated enough to bite within a moment and the next moment they are fine. This is not the profile of a "psycho dog." This is just how dogs are. They don't hold grudges or call their lawyer. It's simple. "I'm mad...I bit you...I'm fine." But *why*?

Dogs bite to keep people and other animals in line. They bite out of fear. They bite when a series of circumstances collide that are too much for them. Those circumstances are often invisible to us unless we are very observant. Too bad we can't ask the dogs!

After a biting incident, we mere mortals are forced to make educated guesses after the fact and devise ways to prevent future bites, ignore the problem or kill the dog.

Dog-Proofing Your Child – and Yourself

Here is what parents need to know and what parents and other responsible adults must teach children they care for about safety around dogs:

1. Drill your children on how to answer the question: ***"When should you approach a strange dog?"*** The correct answer is, ***"Never!"***

If we state the rule as a negative – "Never approach a strange dog" or "Don't pet strange dogs" – we're unlikely to achieve the effect intended; human nature being what it is and kids being kids.

This rule should prevent your children from approaching dogs running loose in a park, at friends' homes, reaching over or through fences, going into yards where a dog is tied out, or reaching into car windows or kennel runs.

Instead, tell your child – and remember yourself to set a good example – that ***the only time it is OK to pet a strange dog is when the dog is on a leash, the owner is present, and you've asked permission.*** No exceptions. The owner should know if the dog is safe around children and will tell you so. Watch the dog closely. If the dog willingly approaches your child, the dog is probably friendly. Don't allow your child to run up to a strange dog, even if it is on leash.

The only caveat is that if your child is nervous, frightened or too excitable around dogs, don't allow him or her to pet strange dogs, even *with* permission, until your child can be calm and confident around dogs. Even if a dog likes children – and many don't – a frightened or overly excited child may very easily upset any dog. There may be an ugly scene if the child does all the wrong things, things that dogs hate; i.e., jerking hands away, shrieking, petting roughly, squeezing or pinching, or hugging around the neck. If this is how your child behaves around dogs, have a friend with a friendly dog help you teach your child how to act around dogs. This goes for frightened kids *and* kids who are too bold.

It is never a good idea to pet an unfamiliar dog on the head. This is a dominant gesture in "Doglish". Don't assume that a dog who cowers or growls when you reach to touch his head has been beaten. This is a "temperament training" issue, and in the section below on "Gotcha!" training, you will see why we are focusing a lot of attention on the head. With strange dogs, it is better to offer a closed hand and to pet under the chin or on the chest.

2. ***If you or your child are approached by a strange dog “at large” (loose) acting in a threatening manner*** such as growling, snarling and showing teeth, ears up and forward, walking stiffly towards you with a forward body posture (aggressively) or is leaning back with ears back growling or snarling (fearfully) do the following as recommended by Dr. Ian Dunbar, a veterinarian and animal behaviorist:

- a. Be a tree – stand up straight
- b. Plant your roots – stand still
- c. Wrap your branches – hold your arms around yourself in a hug for protection
- d. Look at the ground – avoid direct eye contact
- e. Say “Help! Help! Help!” – don’t scream
- f. Sing songs or recite poetry – to calm yourself and the dog while you wait for help. Dogs are also calmed by rhythmic sounds.

Dr. Dunbar also suggests that as an adult, you may be able to bluff a strange dog by telling him in a stern voice, “Go home!” Or you may want to try giving him an instruction such as “Sit!” In some cases, saying, “Come *here!*” may be enough to send the dog skedaddling off!

Please note that a dog approaching you wagging its tail is not necessarily friendly. You need more information than a wagging tail to determine a friendly dog. Err on the side of caution unless you want to make a study of canine body language.

Always report any dogs at large to the police or animal control. Give a good description and location of the animal.

In the city, if a dog bite is serious enough to require medical attention, by law, the doctor or hospital will notify police or animal control. The dog who has bitten seriously enough to require medical attention will usually be quarantined. A dog at large will be taken to a shelter and kept for as long as their policy allows unless the owner claims him.

Worst case scenario: If a dog looks as though he has serious intentions to attack you, prepare to offer a “sacrifice” – your jacket or purse or shoe. If you can distract the dog, you may be able to thwart an attack and get away. When trying to escape, do not run unless you are absolutely certain that the dog is totally interested in your sacrifice. If not, move slowly sideways, eyes down, along the path of the nearest exit.

If you are being attacked (God forbid), drop to the ground, roll into a ball, and cover your head and ears with your arms, yelling “Help! Help! Help!” with staccato tones. At this point, you must wait until it’s over.

I sincerely hope you never have a need to use this information.

3. ***Do not ever leave your children unsupervised around any dog – at home or away.*** Do not allow your children and their friends to play outside or in rooms away from your eyes with any dog. At what age can a child be trusted? The upper age limit on this can vary. Some children younger than preteens are mature enough to conduct themselves appropriately around dogs; others aren’t. Conversely, at what age can a dog be trusted with children? The definitive answer is: “that depends.” You absolutely must use common sense and good judgment regarding safety issues.

There are several reasons why children must be supervised around dogs. Children may mistreat a dog when out of your sight. You don’t think *your child* would ever do such a thing, and the next thing you know he or she has hit the dog or cut it with scissors or pushed it down the stairs.

Another very good reason to supervise children around dogs is that you need to call the shots about what is safe behavior of children around dogs and what is appropriate play with the dog. If you are not there, you cannot see or know what is going on. Left alone with children, dogs often bite and nip, and children (depending on their age and reasoning ability) can’t or won’t tell you what led up to the biting incident. Again, we can’t ask the dog!

Small children run, scream and flail their arms, turning on a dog’s prey drive. A puppy will ***always*** chase and nip at children running. Your children or grandchildren must learn from you how to act around dogs and what games are safe to play.

Kids may take away toys or go near a dog who is eating. If this dog is unsocialized to small

children and has not had any bite prevention training, you are almost sure to get a bite. Puppies are usually much more forgiving of these actions.

Hand games, tug-of-war, hitting, kicking, throwing things at the dog, poking him with sticks, grabbing things away, pulling on tails and pinching skin, and enticing the dog to chase are **exactly how children play with dogs**. These are also the situations in which children are frequently bitten. Depending on the age and temperament of the dog, its jaw strength and how much bite inhibition training it has had, a bite may not even break the skin. Yet as you've seen on TV news shows, a biting incident can seriously injure or maim a child. A fatal dog attack rarely occurs. Children are bitten on the face because that is eye level for many dogs. Dogs go for the closest target. Adults are often bitten on the hands, arms and legs.

Our shelters in Des Moines are full of dogs who have a biting history before their first birthday due to exactly these kinds of situations. The prior owners may tell the shelter that they are giving up the dog because "they don't have time for him." They feel that maybe "someone else will have better luck with him." The sad truth is that untrained and unsocialized dogs – especially those who have been mistreated by children or adults and/or have a biting history – rarely end up being good pets for anyone. And we know what happens to these dogs.

So, what to do? Teach the dog basic obedience. Teach your children to respect animals and how to play with dogs.

Tugging games are unsafe unless a dog willingly relinquishes objects or has been taught to release on a verbal cue. In other words, if your dog does not have a soft mouth, tug games are out. Fetch games with rope toys, bumpers, balls and Frisbees are safe as long as the dog will willingly give up the object if little hands are around his face. Recall games are fun and other kids can play, too.

Aside from petting and playing, some of the best interactions come from teaching the dog tricks and basic obedience. The dog should have to do something for the owner or the child before being petted or played with. The dog should sit or lie down to be petted and before a toy is thrown. This incorporates training into playing and helps the children become more respected in the dog's eyes.

Deferential behavior such as sitting for all good things is a fundamental, non-confrontational way to make your dog regard children – and all humans – as higher-ranking members of the family hierarchy.

Child- and Animal-Proofing Your Dog - Creating the Friendly Dog

1. **Socialize your puppy.** One of the most important ways to childproof your puppy is to allow him or her to interact now with nice children. Many dogs who don't like children simply haven't been around them. If your prior dogs grew up with children and this puppy will not, socialize your puppy now! This cannot wait.

While you're at it, socialize the puppy to men, women in hats, men with beards and caps, people in uniform and in wheelchairs – anyone who is different from you. Make sure you control the interaction – especially around children – so that your puppy does not have a negative experience as his first imprint. If he does have a bad experience, you are stuck with it. Anything your puppy does not experience now will be deemed scary or threatening within in the next few months.

Your puppy should be introduced carefully to other animals under your direct supervision.

IMPORTANT: *Be extremely careful with your dog around strange dogs. Not all dogs are "dog-friendly". A fight can ensue in a heartbeat. Don't allow your puppy to run up to a strange dog and "get in their face". Many dogs have a personal space of several feet and if your puppy or crosses into that space, you may be putting him in danger. Even if your dog is friendly toward other dogs, other dogs may not be able to interpret his intentions correctly. If you allow your puppy to be hurt by another dog, it will be difficult for him to remain "dog-friendly." Your human perception of "he just wants to say 'hi!'" or "he just wants to play" may be perceived as rudeness by another dog.*

We'll give your puppy opportunities to socialize with the other puppies in class next week. Please study your handout so that you will know what is appropriate play and what to do if your puppy is shy or too rough.

2. **“Gotcha!” training.** Practice giving your puppy treats (or part of his meal) while you slowly reach for his collar. Touch it gently at first, progressing to quick grabs where the skin is actually pinched, much like you would do if your puppy was running through an open door toward a busy street. People are often bitten when grabbing at the collar. We are advising you to desensitize your pup to this experience because you may need it for safety. From a dog’s point of view, there is historically *never* a pleasant reason to be grabbed at. Being grabbed by the collar is usually a predictor of “yucky things for dogs.” It may mean being pulled or dragged off where he doesn’t want to go. Too often being grabbed by the collar means physical punishment; i.e., scruff shakes, hitting, angry voices and intimidation.

Sometimes dogs bite if their tail is handled. Most dogs are very sensitive about their tails. You’ll notice it stiffen when you touch it. Watch for changes in his body language so that you can back up and build him up to being OK with having his tail handled gently or roughly. Give your puppy a treat while you lightly touch his tail, then massage it, and progress to grabbing his tail.

You may notice that your puppy does not like being petted on the head or hugged. Petting on the head and hugging are not “doggy things”; they are human ways of showing affection. Reaching over a dog’s head (a very dominant gesture in dog body language) and restraining in a hug are not enjoyable experiences for dogs that have not been taught pleasant associations with this type of handling. A puppy may be sensitive about being touched on the ears or about the mouth, so we are having you do this type of training. The “schmuzzles” mouth massage and “ear slides” we recommend are not only calming; they are intended to create a positive association with being touched on the head. The restraint exercises do the same thing.

Our instructions on Tail Waggin’ (Focus) are designed to induce your puppy to willingly make eye contact and not to perceive human stares as a threat. You may have heard that eye contact is threatening to many dogs and that you shouldn’t stare at a strange dog. This is why you want to condition your puppy to *enjoy* eye contact and to orient himself to you.

3. **Prevent object, food bowl and location guarding.** Every dog is capable of biting and every dog has a biting threshold, or a limit to what combination of scary, intimidating or uncomfortable situations he will tolerate before lashing out. You may never guess the combination of circumstances that will trigger your dog to bite until it’s too late. You will feel bewildered and betrayed by your dog’s aggression or biting behavior. Be assured that almost every puppy will eventually try out any or all of these behaviors. What you do to prevent this will make a difference in whether this puppy stays in your home for its entire life or not.

Physical punishment for these behaviors almost always causes the dog to escalate. We’d like you to **prevent these behaviors**.

Quite often in the home, guarding tendencies show up around objects, food bowls and locations. These behaviors, called “resource guarding”, may show up early in the puppy’s life, often popping up during adolescence. Sometimes they don’t appear until the dog is socially mature.

“Dogs vie for priority access to preferred or limited resources,” according to Dr. Patricia McConnell, Ph.D., an expert on canine ethology (the study of interaction between canine behavior and environment) and aggression.

The ultimate resources for dogs are attention (social contact), access to food and toys, and the best resting places. It’s not surprising that from the canine point of view, object, food and location guarding are normal canine behaviors that we find unacceptable and unsafe.

You’ll know **object guarding** when hearing snarls and growls and seeing lips go up as we approach a dog and reach for their desired toy, bone, dirty Kleenex, piece of garbage, or sock.

To prevent object guarding, teach your puppy the “Leave It” cue. Use this cue *before* he is about to grab a forbidden item. In addition, teach the puppy to exchange objects for a very desirable food treat, putting that behavior on a signal (such as “Give”). Start with your puppy’s least desirable objects (such as toys he has a mild interest in) and progress to his favorite toys and bones. If this preventive training is in place, you may never have to have confrontations over forbidden items.

Often when a puppy has a forbidden object, he will hide under a table or bed, and will growl and snap at you if you stick your hand there to try to pull him out. That is why we recommend that you tether your puppy to you, have him drag a long line, or at the very least, not allow him out of your sight so that he doesn’t have access to forbidden objects.

Stealing off counter tops, out of the laundry and the trash **is not cute** and could put your

puppy and your finances in jeopardy. Many a young puppy has had to have emergency abdominal surgery due to ingesting a knee-high nylon or pork chop bone. Teach your puppy to willingly relinquish objects, supervise him so he doesn't get into the habit of stealing and guarding, and control the environment by puppy proofing your home to keep him safe. This means keeping houseplants, trash, clothing, shoes, and household cleaners and chemicals out of reach.

Food bowl guarding occurs when a dog stops eating when we are near, raises his lips or snarls if anyone walks by the food bowl, attempts to touch him when he's eating, or puts their hands near the bowl whether it's empty or full.

Conventional wisdom says that we should leave a dog alone while he's eating. The problem with this piece of advice is that it doesn't *prevent* nastiness around the food bowl. It only takes a visiting child who doesn't know the rule to find that out.

We are the ones with the opposable thumbs. The food comes from us, not from the floor. Why are the humans allowing themselves to be disciplined by their dog? This goes beyond saying that the dog is "spoiled." We now realize the prevalence and seriousness of dogs guarding food bowls with people around, whether they are children or adults.

We recommend that you require your puppy to sit for his meal, then alternately:

- Hand feed your puppy his meal without the bowl present,
- Hand feed your puppy from his bowl and touch and pet him while he's eating,
- Hang around and drop wonderful things into the food bowl while he's eating, such as small biscuits, pieces of cheese or boneless meat, and,
- Put down an empty bowl and feed him in dribs and drabs

The goal is not to tease the puppy by pulling away the food bowl and putting it back as a test. Our goal is to create an atmosphere of relaxed eating with humans present.

A dog who is **location guarding** is a dog who will not move out of the way when told to do so and will get very nasty toward you when you insist. This often occurs in doorways, on furniture (especially beds), and very often on landings, where the dog watches over his pack from the highest point in the house.

A good way to prevent these behaviors is to coach your puppy off the couch, chair or bed if he's allowed. (But that's another story!) Pick a verbal cue such as "Off!" and throw a treat down on the floor. When he jumps off to get it, use descriptive praise, such as "Good Off, Puppy's Name!" Coax him back up (but don't treat him – he wants to go up there anyway) by patting the furniture and saying, "Up!" Make a game of it. Pretty quickly he will jump off on the verbal cue. If you are going to allow your dog on furniture, he should only do so when invited and should get down on the first verbal signal with no talking back. Physically removing him from furniture while scolding him is not a way to teach him to stay off furniture. You are sending him mixed messages by doing this. You are holding him and touching him, yet scolding him.

If your dog is sleeping in your path such as in hallways or doorways, don't step over him. Make *him* move.

If your puppy is already guarding resources, i.e., his food bowl, objects or locations, please ask your instructors for help.

4. **Do not tie your dog or leave your dog unsupervised in your yard.** Tying is dangerous in more ways than one. Your dog could easily hang himself on just about anything. He is not happier outside in the yard all day while you are at work. A dog who is tied or left alone all day in your yard becomes isolated, noisy, destructive, lonely, frustrated, territorial, and aggressive. He easily becomes a target for teasing. Your neighbors will not appreciate the barking, and you will not be happy about your dog's landscaping designs.

It only takes one child to stick his or her hand over your fence and be bitten for you to be sued. If your dog bites someone under any circumstances, it is *your fault* under the law.

An alternative to tying includes crating inside the house. Keep the crate in a well-traveled area and leave the TV or radio on. Your dog can have safe chew toys in his crate. Do not leave your puppy in the house alone to "test" him now.

When your dog is housebroken, never chews furniture or other possessions, doesn't steal trash or paper, and is an angel when you are home, you can gradually begin leaving for short periods of time. If you have any problems at any point, the dog needs to be kept safe in the crate,

in an exercise pen (dog play pen), or in a puppy-proofed room until you are able to implicitly trust him alone with the run of the house. The more time your dog spends alone outside in the yard or in a kennel in the backyard, the less likely it is that he will learn how to live with you indoors. The more time your dog spends outside, the more barking, digging, dirt and fleas you'll have to contend with. Please teach your dog to live with you. That's where he wants to be. You didn't get him to have another lawn ornament, did you?

If you do these things for your puppy and your family, you are keeping everyone in the community safe and are setting a good example for other dog owners. Bringing an animal into your family is a huge responsibility. Don't create a liability by neglecting this training. Caring for and interacting with pets is a meaningful way to teach children to respect life. Not everyone has the benefits of these lessons. Please make your dog an asset to the community and keep the children you love safe. ♥