

Would Your Dog Bite?

BY JAN GRIBBLE

Jan is a trainer, instructor, and writer from New Mexico. A hard-working NADOI member, she has served in many capacities for our organization, and is a former editor of NADOI Notes.

The days when a parent would ask their child what he or she did to "make the dog bite you" are long past! The assumption now is that the dog is *always* at fault when a bite occurs. Stories about children being mauled by dogs seem to be in the news almost daily. Despite the growing concern about dog bites, most dog owners are poorly educated about the reasons why dogs bite and what should be done to minimize the likelihood of their dog ever biting anyone. The majority of dog bites occur in the dog's home or yard, and most bites are to family members or visitors. Children are more than twice as likely as adults to be bitten, and boys are bitten more often than girls. A large percentage of bites can be attributed to the dog not being properly socialized or trained and very frequently there is no adult supervision when children and the dog are together. The following are a few examples of why dogs bite and what can be done to avoid these situations:

Scenario 1: The dog is protecting its territory from someone it perceives as an intruder.

Dogs that are chained often become territorial and are more likely to bite children and adults approaching them. Chaining also creates frustration in the dog, as he is able to see the intruder, but not reach them. **Do not chain your dog.** If you need to confine your dog to a kennel or crate, make sure that children know not to stick their fingers inside and make sure that the kennel or crate can be securely closed or locked so that kids cannot try to get inside with the dog. Train your dog to exhibit acceptable good manners when visitors come to your home.

Scenario 2: The dog is guarding an object or food from someone who is trying to take it away.

Children should be taught never to try to take away an object or food from a dog. If you have a dog that growls or snaps when someone tries to take things away from him, consult with a professional trainer.

Scenario 3: The dog is afraid, or is fearful of being hurt or is in pain.

Dogs that have not been properly socialized are often fearful. Socialize your puppy or dog to anything or anyone you want him to be able to handle later on. Provide regular veterinary care for your dog to make sure any health problems are identified and to make sure he is not uncomfortable or in pain. Keep him well groomed so that he doesn't have tangles that pull or sore spots on his skin.

Scenario 4: The dog perceives the person as "prey." Movement and/or sound frequently trigger this reaction.

Many years of natural selection have enabled all canines, including our domestic dogs, to pick out the easiest target when hunting. Young, old, or weak animals are usually easier prey than adults. Children are often the victims of bites because their size and behavior can elicit this response in some dogs. Teach your children how to behave around dogs. If the family dog gets excited and rambunctious when playing with the kids, the supervising adult should call a time out so that children can be stopped from running and yelling, and the dog can be stopped from chasing. To teach your kids how to react around strange dogs, play a game and have them practice these behaviors: (1) when they see a loose dog, have them stop moving, (2) tell them not to call the dog, (3) if the dog approaches them they should stand still and "be a tree"—they should fold their branches in by clasping their hands together and watch their roots grow by looking down at their feet. Count to themselves (not out loud) until the dog goes away or help comes, (4) if the dog knocks them down, become a rock by curling up and protecting their face and neck with their hands and arms. Children should also be taught never to run up to or pet a dog without asking permission first. This includes dogs belonging to friends as well as unknown dogs. Children should be taught to never approach or try to pet any dog behind a fence, or one that is tied up, or in a car.

Scenario 5: The dog is protecting her litter of puppies.

Never allow a child or another person to handle puppies unless you are present and are supervising closely. Remove the mother dog first and confine her in a safe place.

Scenario 6: The person is bitten trying to break up a fight between two or more dogs.

Don't try to break up dogfights with your hands. Use a water hose (if outside) or fire extinguisher to break up the fight. Always separate the dogs first before checking for injuries, as the fight may resume.

Scenario 7: The dog believes it has the right to correct a person for breaking the rules the dog has established.

Train your dog. Your dog should never be "leader of the pack." Never hit or kick your dog. You can teach your dog the rules and boundaries without physical violence.

Dog owners can reduce the likelihood of owning a dog that bites by following these 10 steps:

1. Educate yourself about dog breeds and mixes before you buy. Not every dog is suitable for every family.
2. Socialize early, properly, and consistently.
3. Train your dog.
4. Confine your dog behind a secure fence or in your house—do not allow your dog to run loose, ever.
5. Supervise all interactions between your dog and children.
6. Give your dog regular veterinary care.
7. Spay or neuter your dog.
8. Leash your dog when not on your property.
9. Don't encourage barking or aggressive behavior in your dog.
- 10. Be a responsible dog owner!**

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National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors

HELEN CARIOTIS

Editor, NADOI Notes

1322 Greenstone Ln

Duncanville, TX 75137

Helen@caninecounselors.org