

DOG BITES

Education is the key
to prevention

BY LIZ PALIKA PHOTOS BY DEAN PALMER



I ANSWERED the phone early one Monday morning. “Good morning, Kindred Spirits Dog Training. May I help you?” I could hear a woman crying so I asked again, “May I help you?”

A woman said, “This weekend my dog bit my neighbour’s son. ‘Sweetie’ bit him in the face. He had to have stitches and my neighbour just told me she reported my dog to animal control this morning. I’m afraid for my dog and don’t know what to do!”

In my work as a certified dog trainer and animal behaviour consultant, I am on the receiving end of many calls like this. Sweetie’s owner was horrified that her seven-year-old Miniature Poodle had been capable of biting a child in the face, but at the same time was afraid that her dog would be taken from her and euthanized. It hadn’t dawned on her that there

could be even more repercussions, including the potential of a lawsuit and, depending upon what happened, a citation for her dog’s behaviour.

The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta states that there are about 4.5 to 4.7 million people bitten by dogs each year in the United States. One-fifth of those require medical attention and more than 30,000 will require reconstructive surgery.

Dog bite statistics have been compiled by the CDC, the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program (CHIRPP), The Canada Safety Council, and organizations such as *DogsBite.org*. Although numbers may vary depending upon the sources, several things do show up.

Bite statistics

Children are bitten far more often than adults, with kids between the ages of five and nine years bitten the most. In children under 10 years of age, boys are bitten slightly more often than girls and that continues into adulthood with young adult males receiving more than 60 per cent of bites.

More than a third of the bites involved the family dog; 35 per cent involved a known dog belonging to a friend or neighbour; and 12 per cent involved a stray dog. In slightly more than 20 per cent, the dog was unknown.

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In almost 30 per cent of the dog bite incidents, there had been no interaction with the dog at the time of the attack. This category, however, also includes delivery people, mail carriers, kids on skateboards, and other activities that could trigger a dog's protective or predatory drives.

In about 18 per cent of the cases, the victim was playing with the dog when the bite happened. In another 18 per cent, the victim was petting the dog, feeding the dog or walking the dog when another dog attacked them. In fewer than six per cent of the cases, the victim was either disciplining the dog, taking something away from the dog, or breaking up a dog fight.

Breeds vary

Pit bulls and Rottweilers always make the news when they are involved in a dog bite incident, but the reality is that breeds involved vary tremendously. Janet Parker, owner of Clever Canine Training & Behaviour Consulting in Victoria, B.C., said that four of her most recent dog bite cases involved two Bichons Frise, a Miniature Pinscher, and a Havanese mix.

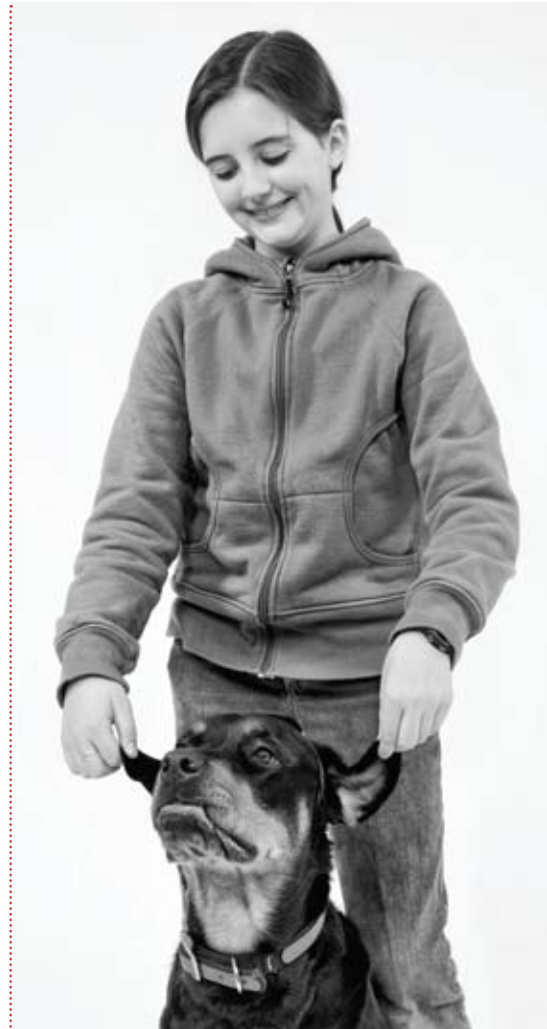
As a dog trainer and behaviourist, I frequently talk to owners of biting dogs and the dogs' breeds, ages and sizes vary tremendously.


Many researchers have studied dog bite cases and numerous lists are available regarding what, why and when these happen. Some of the most common causes of dog bites include:

- The dog was resource-guarding (protecting a treasured item) and someone stepped too close or tried to take the item away.
- The dog was protecting its territory and someone came into that area.
- A child had been repeatedly annoying the dog (pulling ears, tail or hair; or climbing on the dog, etc.).
- The dog was sleeping soundly and was startled.
- The dog was old, in pain and grumpy.
- The dog was frightened or hurt.
- The dog had not learned bite inhibition and used its mouth too roughly in play or in other instances.
- The dog was playing and became overstimulated.

Warning signs

In the vast majority of cases, a family dog (not necessarily a stray or free-roaming pack of dogs) will provide ample warning signs before biting. Contrary to popular belief, a growl is not always the first warning prior to a bite. When interacting with a dog, pay attention when the dog yawns, turns its head



 Do not annoy a dog by pulling its ears or waving your hands in its face – some of the most common causes of dog bites.



Meeting a variety of people in different situations gives a dog confidence in his owner and himself.

away or tries to get up and move away. These are signs the dog is stressed. Perhaps the grooming is too rough, the training is confusing or the child is annoying the dog.

Far too many people are bitten each year, but the vast majority of dog bites can be prevented.

The first step is to **choose a dog wisely**; research breeds carefully and choose a dog from a breed (or mixture of breeds) that you feel you can live with, take care of, and handle. Make sure the dog's personality will mesh well with your family. If everyone in the family is calm and steady, a hyperactive, busy dog will not be a good fit. If your household is full of kids coming and going, a protective dog will likely not be a good choice.

Dogs should be spayed or neutered unless they are show dogs or being used in a breeding program. Intact male dogs bite more than any other classification of dogs.

All dogs need training. Training teaches the dog to look to its owner for direction and guidance. Training also teaches the dog household rules and social manners.

All dogs need socialization. Meeting a variety of people and learning to handle different situations in different places gives a dog confidence in both his owner and himself.

Don't play aggressive games. Waving your hands in the dog's face, play-boxing with him and wrestling teach the dog that fighting with people is normal and acceptable.



Safety with children

Children should never be left alone with a dog – even for just a few minutes. A crying child, a child who is running and screaming, or a child who interferes with the dog can easily become a prey object to any dog.

In my dog training classes, I have several guidelines that I share with parents of young children. All kids need to know:

- Never approach strange dogs.
- Ask permission before petting any dog.
- If approached by a dog, become a tree: Stand tall, tuck your hands in your armpits, and do not look at the dog.
- If chased by a dog, do not run and scream. Instead, curl up in a ball on the ground, with your arms over your face and ears.
- Do not stare at dogs, put your face in a dog's face, or kiss the dog on its face.
- Leave dogs alone when they are eating, sleeping or caring for puppies.
- Do not hug the dog's head, climb on him, ride him like a pony, pull his ears or otherwise torment him.



Children should ask permission before petting a strange dog.



Parents should never assume that their patient, good dog will always be patient and good. Eventually that dog may become overwhelmed, hurt or just plain tired of a child making its life unbearable.

Decreasing dog bite incidents begins with dog owners. We cannot assume that our dogs are not part of the problem, because in any given situation, any dog can bite. We must be wise dog owners and protect our children, our dogs and any people who may associate with our dogs.

Liz Palika is an award-winning writer, a certified dog trainer and certified animal behaviour consultant. She and her husband share their home with three Australian Shepherds. For more information, visit kindredspiritsk9.com.



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Safety discussion



Children should never kiss a strange dog or stare into its eyes.



If Your Dog Bites

IF YOUR DOG BITES someone, don't try to blame the person or your dog. When talking to anyone, just state the facts.

Immediately confine your dog; authorities may want him quarantined and if you can do that in your house, it will be significantly less expensive. Make sure you have copies of the dog's vaccination records available.

Help the bitten person get medical care, if required. If medical care is needed, the doctor will report the dog bite.

Know your community's laws. Many require all dog bites to be reported to the police or animal control. Comply with the law.

Talk to the bitten person, or in the case of a child, the parents. If the two parties can talk reasonably and discuss the incident calmly, often nothing else needs to be done. However, the person who was bitten may ask that the dog get some training, that your fence be reinforced, or even that your dog be euthanized. Depending upon the demands, you may need to contact a mediator or an attorney.