

Children are most at risk for dog bites, so teach them the right way to interact

By Lynda Shrager

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According to the Humane Society of the United States, 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year, and 80 percent of those are familiar dogs. Half the victims are children, who are most at risk of serious bites.

A recent study from the University of Buffalo's School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences found that "young children are especially vulnerable to severe dog bites in the head and neck, and there is a correlation between cases of dog bites and rising temperatures."

While there is never a guarantee that a dog won't ever bite, there are ways to significantly reduce the risk. The American Kennel Club recommends educating yourself about characteristics of various breeds and choosing one that will best fit with your family makeup.

Socialize the dog by introducing it to all types of people, noises, machines and crowds. A dog that is part of the family is less likely to become dangerous than one that is tied up alone for long periods. Train the dog to at least follow the commands of sit, stay, down, heel and come. Keep the dog healthy through routine veterinary visits and timely vaccinations.

The Humane Society notes that even the friendliest dog can get agitated due to a child's quick movements and loud voice. Children should always speak quietly and move slowly around dogs. They should also be supervised around animals and taught to always ask an owner's permission before petting a dog. If it's OK, let the dog sniff first, and then have the child pet the dog's sides or back gently.

If a dog is in a car or behind a fence, it may be protective of its space, so approach cautiously. "Let sleeping dogs lie" is a good rule of thumb; if a dog is asleep, eating, drinking, playing with a toy or mothering its puppies, it is safest to leave it alone.

Teach children to understand a dog's body language as a way of gauging its mood. A dog in a "good mood" will most likely have its head up, tail down and wagging, ears neutral and hair smooth down its back. Its mouth and lips will seem relaxed.

A threatening dog may have his ears standing up, a wrinkled nose showing his teeth, tail standing straight up and raised fur along the back of his neck. The dog may growl or snarl.

If you or your child gets bitten, seek immediate medical attention. Try to find out as much about the dog as possible and report the incident to your local animal-control officer.

If you can, have the dog confined until it can be examined.

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- Stand still like a tree, with hands at your sides or around you like a hug.
- Don't make eye contact, as dogs sometimes take this as a challenge for power.
- As the dog loses interest, slowly back away, keeping it in sight — never turn and run.
- If you are attacked, try putting an object between you and the dog (bike, backpack or jacket).

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