

PREVENTING DOG BITES IN CHILDREN

Part 1: Motivations & Myths



Ilana R. Reisner, DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVB
Reisner Veterinary Behavior & Consulting Services, LLC, Media, Pennsylvania

The potential to cause injury is inherent in all pets. Biting is common and well within the “reference range” of canine behavior, and any dog—including beloved family pets—can bite. In fact, in a recent study of dogs that had a history of biting children, the most frequently represented breeds were German shepherds, English springer spaniels, Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, and American cocker spaniels, two-thirds of which had no history of biting.¹

Veterinarians may be the first to recognize aggressive behavior in a dog. After all, it is understandable that our patients might attempt to bite us. Thankfully, low-stress handling methods in veterinary practices are reducing the likelihood of biting behavior.^{2,3} Since behavior in one setting can make an appearance in other settings, however, we have a responsibility to convey that information to the client.

WHY DO DOGS BITE?

When dogs bite, they are almost always driven by fear and/or pain. Fear and pain are also common triggers of aggression toward children, especially toddlers and preschoolers in the immediate or extended family, or visitors to the home. Although adults are the most common victims of dog bites overall, young children are bitten more severely and present to hospital emergency rooms for bites to the head and face more often than adults.⁴ So what can we do, as dog health professionals, to minimize the risk and keep our clients’ children safe?

Social media is full of photos and videos depicting children in unsafe situations with dogs and other pets, all for the sake of “cute.” What can you, as a veterinary professional, do? Find out by reading **Mixing Children & Pets: When Social Media “Cuteness” Goes Wrong** by Dr. Ilana Reisner in the March/April 2015 issue of *Today’s Veterinary Practice*, available at tvjournal.com.

WHY ARE CHILDREN AT RISK OF DOG BITES?

Newborn infants, awake or asleep, may be at risk for fatal attacks resembling predatory behavior.⁵ Warning signs, if any, include the following behavior in dogs:

- Hyperalertness (focused on infant)
- Ears forward/up
- “Muzzle punching” or “poking” at the infant with a closed mouth
- Whining, high-pitched barking
- Circling and/or jumping up.

Babies and toddlers can be intimidating to dogs as they become more mobile—rolling over, reaching, climbing, and walking (which leads to grabbing and falling, sometimes too close for comfort). Although the dog may have “known” a toddler for a year or more, the child’s new (and unsteady) mobility can make a nervous dog more likely to display aggression.

Warning signs, if any, include the following behavior in dogs:

- Avoiding toddler by walking away
- Growling at child who is staring at, or approaching, dog
- Showing signs of anxiety (**Table**).

Young/preschool-age children can be impulsive, fast-moving, loud, and oblivious to a dog lying nearby. They are most likely to do things “to” the dog, such as hugging, holding the dog’s head, or disturbing a sleeping or resting dog, yet are still too young to follow safety instructions reliably. Like toddlers, preschoolers are most likely to be bitten by the family pet, or a relative’s pet, in the home.

Because preschool-age children are more independent than toddlers, supervision by caregivers is often less consistent; therefore, inappropriate interactions can occur in spite of “supervision.” In fact, several studies have reported that children who are bitten by dogs they know are most often bitten in the presence of parents or other caregivers.^{6,7}

The presumed explanation is that interactions in



This is the first article in a 2-part series on keeping children from being bitten by dogs. The second article—**Management & Safety Practices**—will be published in an upcoming issue of *Today’s Veterinary Practice*.



TABLE.
Signs of Anxiety or Stress in Dogs

Lip-licking
Yawning
Looking away
Lowering head or body
Lifting foreleg
Wide “whale” eyes

these cases are viewed as “gentle” and appropriate from a human standpoint. From the dog’s standpoint, however, a child reaching, petting, hugging, staring, or lying nearby is seen as threatening, which can provoke defensive (fear-based) aggression.

Warning signs, if any, may include the following behavior in dogs:

- Attempting to walk away
- Looking away
- Licking lips
- Growling.

Some dogs may lick the child as a displacement of stress (see **Common Dog Safety Myths**).

Older children are more likely than their younger counterparts to be bitten outdoors by dogs they do not know, during an interaction initiated by the dog rather than the child.⁷ In these cases, there may not be an opportunity to note warning signs, such as staring; instead, the emphasis for prevention involves a combination of community efforts to increase education and safety practices, such as improved fencing, vaccinations, and enforcement of leash laws. More information on these safety practices will be provided in Part 2 of this article series.

“BUT THE BITE WAS COMPLETELY UNPROVOKED!”

Provocation of biting is often misunderstood. It is safe to say that, with the possible exception of irritable behavior due to pain or systemic or neurologic disease, *all bites are provoked*. There is usually an identifiable trigger that may or may not be preventable.

Again, children may be provocative simply by approaching, reaching toward, or bending near a resting dog, or walking too close to the dog’s food, toys, or spot on the couch. A common trigger of resource guarding is the small child approaching a parent or caregiver when the dog is beside (or sitting on the lap of) the adult.

A bite from a known dog may also be provoked when a visiting child enters the house or yard. Even though the child might visit every day after school and clearly isn’t a total stranger, he or she may still be considered unfamiliar by the dog, whose actual “circle of trust” can be surprisingly small.

COMMON DOG SAFETY MYTHS

Despite our pet-centered society and the fact that so many households include dogs, there is a general lack of knowledge among both parents and dog owners about safety practices.⁸ Veterinarians and pediatricians should not assume that safety practices at home are adequate. Following are some common myths about dogs and children.

MYTH 1. *Dogs socialized to children as puppies will not bite them as adults.*

The most common reasons for bites to family children are fear, resource guarding, pain (including accidental falls), and “benign” but provocative interactions, such as petting or hugging.¹ With the exception of mild fear, none of these are reliably prevented by socialization.

Socialization during the “sensitive period” (puppies, about 3–12 weeks of age) involves more than just “exposure” to children. Socialization should be applied carefully so that the puppy feels safe at all times. Regardless of these efforts, some dogs will always be more anxious than others.

Socialization alone will not prevent resource guarding, especially if the puppy or dog is insecure about its food. Most important, puppies can grow up around children and seem comfortable but still bite when they are hurt, startled, or significantly scared.

MYTH 2. *If a dog is safe with adults, the dog is also safe with children.*

To many dogs, juvenile humans—whether newborns, babies, toddlers, or preschoolers—act much differently than adults. They are a different size but, more important behaviorally, children sound, move, and interact differently than adults. Just as dogs might be leery of any human characteristic to which they have not been exposed, such as skin color, facial hair, clothing/hoodies, and body weight, they can be worried around children.

MYTH 3. *I taught my child to discipline the dog so that the dog submits to him.*

The relationship between dogs and humans is not a competition for social dominance. As noted, most bites are related not to dominance conflicts but to fear or resource guarding. If a dog is growling at a child and that child yells, “NO!” the aggression is likely to escalate, either in the moment or in future encounters.⁹ In some cases, an anxious dog might also be more inclined to respond defensively to a child’s “threats” than to those of an adult (however, there is no evidence to support or refute this).

MYTH 4. *My child knows how to be gentle, so I don’t have to worry.*

As mentioned above, gentle and affectionate interactions, such as touching, petting, hugging, and kissing can trigger bites because dogs and humans speak different (body) languages. When one dog directly approaches another with prolonged eye contact, especially if the other dog is resting, it may be interpreted as a threat. The resting dog might then signal stress or anxiety by licking its lips, yawning, or looking away (the reverse is also true—the approaching dog might signal stress and turn away if the resting dog is staring). Such early indications of stress are overlooked by humans of all ages. If the young child continues to approach despite these signals, a bite might occur.

MYTH 5. *As long as the dog is not a pit bull, it should be safe with young children.*

Any breed or breed mix can bite a child. It happens every day. In addition to the breeds mentioned earlier, in another study of children presenting to emergency departments, the breeds biting familiar children included Shih Tzus, Yorkshire terriers, and Labrador retrievers.⁷ It is interesting to note that dogs that bit familiar children in the home were unlikely to be (identified as) pit bulls.

MYTH 6. *Pit bulls used to be called “nanny dogs,” so they’re safe with young children.*

As stated above, any breed or mix can bite a child. Unfortunately, there is no “childproof” dog.

MYTH 7. *Dogs that kiss children and wag their tails are not going to bite them.*

Canine behavior is not always what it seems to be. “Kissing” may be a sign of anxiety displacement, motivational conflict, or fear.¹⁰ When a toddler softly touches the foot of a sleeping dog and the dog awakens abruptly and licks the child, the lick is most likely a sign of worrying and a wish for the child to go away. Tail wagging is a signal of alert engagement only. That engagement or interaction may be driven by affiliative behavior, or it may be an indirect effect of anxiety.

IN SUMMARY

Clearly, the safety of young children with dogs (and dogs with young children) requires an understanding of canine body language and behavior so that unsafe interactions are interrupted or (ideally) avoided completely. Management strategies to help prevent dog bites in children will be discussed in Part 2.

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ILANA R. REISNER

Ilana R. Reisner, DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVB, is a veterinary behaviorist and consultant in Media, Pennsylvania. She served as the director of the Veterinary Behavior Clinic at University of Pennsylvania Veterinary Hospital and assistant professor of behavioral medicine at University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Reisner is past president of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. She received her DVM from Oregon State University and her PhD from Cornell University.

