

Dog Bite Prevention

According to a survey conducted in 1994 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 2% of the U.S. population—about 4.7 million people—are bitten by a dog each year. The vast majority of these bites (about 83%) don't result in injury, and no medical treatment is sought. About 800,000 individuals, however, half of them children, seek medical treatment for dog bites. Among children 14 years and younger, injury rates are significantly higher for boys (57%) than for girls (43%), and the rate of dog bite injuries is highest among children ages five to nine years. Between 15 and 20 of these annual bites nationwide are fatal.

The importance of these numbers should not be minimized. However, the relative risk dogs pose to people compared to other causes of accidents and fatalities should be kept in mind if we are to adopt a rational, effective approach to reducing the risk of dog bites. The risk of fatal injury directly due to a dog bite is miniscule compared to human fatalities caused by other accidents, such as those caused by cars (43,730 deaths annually), falls (14,440), choking (5,555), fires (3,410), drowning (3,334), guns (791) and bicycles (774). Even among the most rare causes of accidental deaths—including lightning, forklifts and dog bites—lightning fatalities occur five times more often than dog-bite fatalities¹. Among children, 10 fatalities occur annually from dog bites, compared to 826 from injuries inflicted by parents and other caregivers.

To compare accidental injuries treated in emergency rooms, a person is roughly 23 times more likely to be injured from a fall than from a dog bite, 12 times more likely to be injured by a car, 7 times more likely to be injured by a sharp object and 1.5 times more likely to be injured by a bicycle. These data are all the more remarkable if the prevalence of dogs in human society is considered—an estimated 74.8 million dogs were kept as pets in the United States in 2007–2008.

Increasing Safety, Reducing Risks

To reduce the number of injuries from dog bites, adults and children should be educated about bite prevention, and dog owners should practice responsible dog ownership.

Recommendations for Parents

Be aware of the fact that *any* dog can bite. From the smallest to the largest, even the most friendly, cute and easygoing dogs might bite if provoked. The vast majority of dog bites are from a dog known to the child—his or her own pet, a neighbor's or a friend's. You can help protect your child from dog bites by discussing with her the appropriate way to behave around dogs. To help parents educate their children about basic safety around dogs, we offer the following tips:

- Children should not approach, touch or play with any dog who's sleeping, eating, chewing on a toy or bone, or caring for puppies. Animals are more likely to bite if they're startled, frightened or caring for young.
- Children should never approach a barking, growling or scared dog.
- Children should not pet unfamiliar dogs without asking permission from the dog's guardian first. If the guardian says it's okay, the child should first let the dog sniff his closed hand. Then

taking care to avoid petting the dog on the top of the head, he can pet the dog's shoulders or chest.

- Children should not try to pet dogs who are behind a fence or in a car. Dogs often protect their home or space.
- If a child sees a dog off-leash outside, she should not approach the dog and should tell an adult immediately.
- If a loose dog comes near a child, he should not run or scream. Instead, he should avoid eye contact with the dog and stand very still, like a tree, until the animal moves away. Once the dog loses interest, the child can slowly back away until he's out of sight.
- If a child falls down or is knocked to the ground by a dog, she should curl up in a ball with her knees tucked into her stomach and her fingers interlocked behind her neck to protect her neck and ears. If a child stays still and quiet like this, the dog will most likely just sniff her and then go away.
- Children should never try to outrun a dog. If a dog does attack a child, the child should "feed" the dog his jacket, bag, bicycle—or anything that he has for the dog to grab onto or anything he can put between himself and the dog.

The following activity will help you and your child understand the difference between safe and potentially dangerous interactions with dogs. Recite aloud with your child the following list of pledges:

1. I will not stare into a dog's eyes.
2. I will not tease, try to go near or pet dogs behind fences, dogs in cars, or dogs chained or tied up in yards.
3. I will not touch a dog I see loose (off-leash) outside.
4. If I see a loose dog, I will tell an adult immediately.
5. I will not run and scream if a loose dog comes near me.
6. I will stand still like a tree and be very quiet if a dog comes near me.
7. I will not touch or play with a dog while she's eating or sleeping.
8. I will only pet a dog if I have permission from the dog's owner.
9. Then I will introduce myself to the dog by letting her sniff my closed hand.

Understanding dog body language is another key way to help you and your children avoid being bitten. Teach your children that they can read dogs' body language to better understand what dogs are feeling and avoid those whose body language indicates that they're feeling anxious, afraid, threatened or aggressive. Please see our [Canine Body Language](#) article for drawings of dogs showing what various feelings look like in dog body language.

· An aggressive dog may try to make herself look bigger. Her ears may be up and forward, the fur on her back and tail may stand on end or puff out, and her tail may be straight up—it may even wag. She may have a stiff, straight-legged stance and be moving toward or staring directly at what she thinks is an approaching threat. She may also bare her teeth, growl, lunge and bark. Continued approach toward a dog showing this body language could result in a bite!

· An anxious or scared dog may try to make herself look smaller. She may shrink to the ground in a crouch, lower her head, repeatedly lick her lips, put her tail between her legs, flatten her ears back and yawn. She may look away to avoid direct eye contact. She may stay very still or roll on her back and expose her stomach. Alternatively, she may try to turn away or slowly move away from what she thinks is an approaching threat. If she can't retreat, she may feel she has no other alternative but to defensively growl, snarl or even bite.

· Many dogs can show a mixture of these body postures, indicating that they feel conflicted. The main idea for children to remember is to avoid any dog showing any of signs of fear, aggression or anxiety—

no matter what else the dog is doing. It's important for children to realize that a wagging tail or a crouching body doesn't always mean friendliness.

The main lesson for children practicing safety around dogs is to not chase or tease dogs they know and to avoid dogs they don't know. The ASPCA Online Store offers several teaching tools that can make learning about how to be safe around animals fun, including *Dogs, Cats & Kids* (DVD and video), *Dogs, Cats & Big Kids* (DVD and video), the Teaching Bite Free Package (DVD and video), and a Dog Bite Prevention Activity Worksheet. The National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE) also offers The BARK (Be Aware, Responsible and Kind) Dog Bite Prevention Program, the Play It Safe with Dogs coloring book in English and Spanish, and the Doggone Crazy family board game. Please see this website for more information: <http://www.nahee.org/>.

Recommendations for Pet Guardians

Although you can't guarantee that your dog will never bite someone, there are many ways that you can significantly reduce the risk.

Before You Get a Dog

- Avoid purchasing your new dog at a pet store. Most pet store puppies come from "puppy mills," large-scale commercial breeding kennels that often house dogs in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, without adequate veterinary care, food, water and human companionship or socialization. By buying a pet-shop puppy, you're likely supporting a cruel industry, and you run the risk of taking home a sick puppy. Dogs from puppy mills have been reportedly diagnosed with ailments such as respiratory infections and pneumonia, as well as hereditary defects like hip dysplasia. They may also be poorly socialized to people and other animals. In addition, your new "purebred" puppy might not actually be purebred. Dogs at puppy mills are often bred indiscriminately, and lineage records are sometimes falsified to misrepresent mixed breeds as purebred dogs. Responsible breeders *do not* sell their dogs through pet stores.
- Consider hiring a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) or Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) to assist you in selecting a well-socialized dog of stable temperament that best fits your family's lifestyle.
- Adopt from a well-managed animal shelter whose staff and volunteers can fill you in on the dog's background, her personality and her behavior in the shelter.
- If you prefer to purchase a dog from a breeder, find a small-scale, reputable breeder who sells only one breed, breeds only once a year or less, and allows you to visit his or her home and kennel. The breeder should show you the mother and relatives of the puppy and provide a clean, loving home environment for them, including lots of handling, play and interaction with different people of all ages.
- Avoid purchasing dogs through classified ads in newspapers or through the Internet. Many puppy mills and backyard breeders sell their dogs through newspaper and Internet ads. (A backyard breeder is a pet owner who breeds dogs on purpose or just allows dogs to mate on their own. Backyard breeders usually have little to no knowledge about breed standards, genetics, or proper puppy-rearing and socialization.)
- Consider waiting until your children are older. Because so many dog bites happen to young children, waiting until they are at least 10 years old is recommended. Please visit [our website](#) for information about finding responsible breeders.

- Educate yourself on dog care, raising a puppy and humane, reward-based training methods. Some of the books and DVDs that top our list of recommendations are *Dog-Friendly Dog Training* by Andrea Arden, *PetsIncredible Complete Dog Training* (DVD), *New Puppy, Now What?* (DVD), *Maran Illustrated Dog Training*, *Your Outta Control Puppy* by Teoti Anderson, *Culture Clash* by Jean Donaldson, *Taking Care of Puppy Business: A Gentle Approach for Positive Results* by Gail Pivar and Leslie Nelson, *How to Teach a New Dog Old Tricks* by Dr. Ian Dunbar, *Before You Get Your Puppy* and *After You Get Your Puppy* by Dr. Ian Dunbar, and *Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog* by Pat Miller.

After You Get a Dog

- Spay or neuter your dog as soon as possible. Healthy puppies can be spayed or neutered as early as eight weeks of age. Spayed or neutered dogs may be less likely to bite.
- Socialize your dog! An ounce of prevention (puppy socialization) is worth a pound of cure (trying to fix behavior problems in adulthood). Well-socialized dogs make enjoyable, trustworthy companions. Undersocialized dogs are a risk to their owners and to others because they're frightened by everyday things. Fearful dogs are more likely to aggress or bite. They tend to fight with other dogs. They don't adapt to new situations, and routine outings (like to the vet's office) become difficult for them and everyone involved. Socializing is the opposite of isolating. It means to let puppies meet, greet and enjoy a variety of people, animals, places and things. Done properly, socializing helps puppies feel comfortable and friendly—rather than uncomfortable and potentially aggressive—in many situations and around all kinds of people and animals. The main rule for effective socializing is to let your dog progress at her own pace and never force her to be around someone or something when she's clearly fearful or uncomfortable. Please see our article, [Socializing Your Puppy](#), for more information.
- Take your dog to humane, reward-based training classes—the earlier the better. We recommend starting your puppy in puppy kindergarten classes as early as eight weeks, right after her first set of vaccinations. Early training opens a window of communication between you and your dog that will help you consistently and effectively teach her what you expect of her.
- Make your dog a part of the family. Don't chain or tie her outside, and don't leave her unsupervised for long periods of time—even in a fenced yard. Because tied-out dogs become frustrated and can feel relatively defenseless, they're nearly three times more likely to bite. Well-socialized and supervised dogs are much less likely to bite.
- Don't wait for a serious accident to happen. The first time your dog shows aggressive behavior toward anybody, even if no injury occurs, seek professional help from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB), a veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB), or a qualified Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT). If you elect to hire a CPDT because you can't find a behaviorist in your area, be sure to determine whether she or he has professional training and extensive experience in successfully working with aggression, as this training and experience are beyond what CPDT certification requires. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), for information about finding an expert in your area. Your community animal control agency or humane society may also offer or be able to refer you to helpful services.
- Err on the safe side. Be aware of common triggers of aggression, including pain, injury or sickness, the approach of strangers or strange dogs, the approach of people in uniforms, costumes or unusual attire (especially hats), unexpected touching, unfamiliar places, crowds, and loud noises like thunder, wind, construction, fireworks and appliances. If possible, avoid

exposing your dog to these triggers. If she seems stressed or panicked in crowds, leave her at home. If she overreacts to visitors or delivery personnel, keep her in another room when they come to your house. Work with a qualified behavior and training professional to help your dog become more comfortable with these and other situations. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), for information about finding an expert in your area.

- Always supervise children and dogs. Never leave a baby or child younger than 10 years old alone with a dog. Teach your children to treat your dog gently and with respect, giving the dog her own space and opportunities to rest. Some good books and videos that we recommend on children and dogs are *Living with Kids & Dogs... Without Losing Your Mind* by Colleen Pelar, *Raising Puppies and Kids Together—A Guide for Parents* by Pia Silvani and Lynn Eckhardt, *Child-Proofing Your Dog* by Brian Kilcommons, and *Dogs, Cats & Kids*, a video by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). For more information about children and dogs, please see our article entitled [Children and Pets Living Together](#).
- Fulfill basic animal-care responsibilities. License your dog as required by law and provide regular veterinary care, including rabies vaccinations. Don't allow your dog to roam alone.

Breed-Specific Legislation

Some cities and municipalities have tried breed-specific legislation (BSL)—which regulates or bans certain breeds of dogs—as a way to reduce dog bites. Although the effectiveness of this type of legislation continues to be hotly debated, two recent scientific studies comparing bite rates before and after BSL have shown that the rates remained the same after legislation was enacted. There are several reasons why legislating against certain breeds is not likely to be effective.

First, the breeds most often involved in bite injuries and fatalities change from year to year and from one area of the country to another, depending on the popularity of different breeds. Although genetics do play a role in determining whether a dog will bite, other factors—such as whether the animal is well socialized, supervised, humanely trained and safely confined—play much greater roles. Aggression comprises many complex behaviors that are influenced by a wide variety of factors.

Second, correct breed identification by bystanders, pet owners, police, medical and animal control personnel is unreliable. It becomes virtually impossible with mixed breeds. Just because a dog *looks* like a Labrador-shepherd mix does not mean she is. A mixed-breed dog's genes often include more than just two pure breeds, and, thanks to their genetic diversity, mixed breeds may not even look like their parents. It's convenient for us to identify dogs by the breed (or two breeds) we think they most look like, but the label in no way accurately describes their ancestry. A case in point is the so-called "pit bull." This term is loosely used to describe four breeds of dog: the American pit bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier, the Staffordshire bull terrier and the bull terrier. Because these breeds, and mixes of these breeds, are hard for people to identify, any short-haired, medium-sized dog with a wider-than-average jaw who's involved in an aggressive incident can be labeled a "pit bull." It's not uncommon for newspaper stories about aggressive "pit bulls" to be accompanied by photos of boxers, bullmastiffs and even Boston terriers.

Third, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which conducted a 20-year study that listed the breeds involved in fatal attacks, there's currently no accurate way to identify the total number of dogs of a particular breed and, consequently, there's no measure to determine which breeds are more likely to bite or kill. In fact, the CDC says its own 20-year study is not an appropriate tool for making breed-specific policies or legislative decisions. Instead, the CDC advocates "dangerous dog" laws that focus on individual dogs of *any* breed who have shown aggressive behavior.

Responsible dog ownership of all breeds is the key to dog bite prevention. More effective legislation than BSL is legislation that holds pet guardians accountable for their dogs' behavior by requiring them to pay for victims' pain and suffering and to take corrective action, such as spay/neuter surgery and proper confinement and supervision of their dogs.

¹Bradley, J. (2005). Dogs bite, but balloons and slippers are more dangerous. Berkeley, CA: James & Kenneth Publishers.