

Teaching Your Child to Avoid Dog Bites

Learning to approach a dog in a way that says "Let's be friends" is an important lesson to teach children.

Many children love dogs with a passion, but they also need to learn to love dogs with caution.

Each year, about 4.5 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs—80 percent of them by familiar canines—and it's estimated that more than half of those victims are less than 13 years old. What's more, children are at least three times more likely than adults to sustain a serious dog bite.

The good news is that most bites can be prevented. And during National Dog Bite Prevention month each May, Humane Society Youth, The HSUS' youth affiliate, spreads the word to help keep children (and adults) from suffering the sting of another dog bite.

10 Simple Steps

Even the friendliest dogs can be uncomfortable with a child's quick movements and loud tone of voice. Children tend to get excited around dogs and can approach them quickly, talk loudly and try to hug the animal. Any one of these actions can easily result in a bite. So what's a child to do? In a nutshell: Speak quietly and move slowly around dogs, and follow these simple rules:

- 1. Before petting someone's dog, ask the dog's guardian for permission.** If it's OK, approach slowly and quietly. Let the dog sniff you first, then pet the dog's sides or back gently.
- 2. Never sneak up on or pet a dog who is eating or sleeping.** Animals can bite when they're startled or frightened.
- 3. Never pet a dog who is playing with a toy.** Dogs are often protective of toys, and may think a child is trying to take it.
- 4. Never try to pet a dog who is in a car.** Dogs will often protect that space.
- 5. Never pet a dog who is behind a fence.** Most dogs naturally protect their property and home.

Learning to understand dogs' body language is another important way to avoid getting bit. Teach children that animals use body language to tell us how they feel. When a dog is angry or fearful, she is likely to bite, and should never be approached. Here are the signs to look for:

- 6. An angry dog may try to make herself look big:** ears standing up, the fur on her back standing on end, and tail straight up (it may be wagging). She may bare her teeth and growl, and stare straight at whoever is approaching.
- 7. A frightened dog behaves differently,** and might shrink to the ground, put his tail between his legs and fold his ears back.

Body language says a lot to—and about—dogs.

Although children will most often interact with their family's and neighbors' dogs, they need to know what to do should they encounter an unknown dog, off-leash and without a caregiver. Teach children to avoid such dogs, not make direct eye contact with them and slowly and quietly walk away. If a strange dog approaches, children should follow these tips:

- 8. If you are walking, stop and stand still** (like a tree) with your hands at your side.

9. If you are playing on the ground, lie still on the ground (like a log) with your knees tucked into your stomach and your hands over your ears. When you stay still and quiet like this, the dog will most likely just sniff you and go away.

10. Never, ever try to outrun a dog. Back away slowly from him instead.

Resources available from HSY:

How can you ensure that children learn those valuable lessons, and put them into practice? Humane Society Youth offers the following teaching tools to help parents, teachers, and animal care professionals do just that—in a way that will grab children's attention and make learning fun.

To order HSY's dog bite prevention materials for kids, visit www.humanesocietyyouth.org or call 860-434-8666.