

## Why Are Dog Attacks on the Rise?

In this region, dog attacks have increased 34% over the last five years, and according to a survey of 1,535 people, owners may be to blame for a large number of dog bite injuries. Can you recognize the most obvious sign, along with these nine more subtle signs, that a dog may be about to bite?

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog attacks in England and Wales have increased 34% over the last five years, a rise that may be largely due to communication misunderstandings
- A survey of 1,535 people suggested many may be inadvertently ignoring dogs' warning signals, putting them at risk of a dog bite in the process
- Owner error was, in fact, responsible for a large number of dog bite injuries
- Under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, certain dog breeds are banned in the U.K., but the team suggested the breed bans aren't working to reduce dog attacks, and the focus should be shifted away from breed bans to education and awareness-raising
- Early, proper and ongoing socialization for your dog, along with respecting your dog's boundaries and recognizing signs of fear and stress, are key for dog bite prevention

Dog attacks in England and Wales have increased 34% over the last five years, a rise that may be largely due to misunderstandings.<sup>1</sup> As pet owners, it's our responsibility to learn how to communicate with our pups, including understanding their body language and other cues when they're scared, stressed or nervous.

"Dogs seldom attack without warning," Claire Parkinson, professor at Edge Hill University, said in a news release.<sup>2</sup> She led a survey of 1,535 people that suggested many may be inadvertently ignoring dogs' warning signals, putting them at risk of a dog bite in the process.

"People may hold a misguided anthropomorphic view of their own and other dogs, resulting in inadequate training and misinterpretation of behavior which can increase the risk of a dog bite occurring," she said.<sup>3</sup>

### Dog Body Language Often Misunderstood

Typically, a dog will communicate that he's scared, angry or not feeling well and he wants you to back off. This is why understanding dogs' body language is so important. A tense mouth that's slowly closed with lines around it is an indication of aggression — often as part of the freeze sequence that occurs before a bite.<sup>4</sup>

A **hard, direct stare** with piercing eyes, often accompanied by assertive **body language**, such as an erect tail and a tall, forward body stance, also should not be ignored. However, according to Parkinson's survey, many people are missing these and other important cues:<sup>5</sup>

*"One alarming finding was that many dog-owning respondents couldn't discern a dog's communication cues, and even worse, some said they would react by attempting to cuddle or stroke a worried dog, increasing the risk of being bitten. Owners need to gain a better understanding of how to react to a dog's behavior."*

Owner error was, in fact, responsible for a large number of dog bite injuries. Many of the respondents — 44% — believed "dogs try to be gentle and avoid biting children," while close to half incorrectly thought that "parents are almost always absent when a dog bites a small child."<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, parents are usually present. Parkinson added:

*"It is not enough to only raise awareness of dog body language alone. Awareness raising and education should include how to recognize signals of stress or discomfort in dogs, information about common high-risk situations in which injuries take place, and how to respond appropriately in situations where dogs are stressed, in discomfort, or communicating threat aversion signals."*

Adding to the problem, one-third of those who responded said they follow the advice of celebrity dog trainers on TV, and 47.9% considered TV programs about dog behavior to be the best source of information about risks posed by dangerous dogs.<sup>8</sup>

## **Breed Bans Aren't Working**

Under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, certain dog breeds are banned in the U.K. You can be fined or sentenced to jail if you own a pit bull terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino or Fila Brasileiro.<sup>9</sup> But according to Parkinson, the breed bans aren't working to reduce dog attacks, and the majority of survey respondents couldn't even identify dogs classified as dangerous under the Act.<sup>10</sup>

"There needs to be a shift away from the focus on breed bans to education and awareness-raising," Parkinson said.<sup>11</sup> In their report, Parkinson and colleagues noted:<sup>12</sup>

*"Breed specific legislation is not protecting the public from dog bites and fatalities and the continued focus on breed as an indicator of risk in legislation and in media contributes to confusing public messaging that equates bite risk with only certain types or breeds of dog. Focus must be shifted from breed to education about dog bite risk and an increased awareness of canine body language."*

## **Signs a Dog May Be About to Bite**

Would you recognize a dog telling you to back off? While sometimes it's obvious when a dog doesn't want to be pet, other times it's not. Be on the lookout for whale eye, which describes the white portion of the eye showing at the corner or rim. It's often a sign of anxiety and, when it occurs along with other signs of aggression, is an indicator that the dog doesn't like what you're doing — or what's going on around him.

Other, often subtle, signs of fear and anxiety in dogs follow.<sup>13</sup> If you notice these, the dog probably isn't interested in interacting, so don't approach or try to pet the dog. By paying attention to these signs and respecting the dog by backing off, many dog bites can be avoided:

- Tucked tail
- Yawning

- Lip licking or quivering
- Snarling or growling
- Tail pointing straight out and frozen
- Ear pinned down or erect
- Hair standing up on back of neck
- Staring intensely or avoiding eye contact
- Downward pointing, fast-wagging tail

## Proper Socialization Is Key to a Well-Behaved Dog

Another important tool for raising a well-adjusted, non-aggressive dog is early, proper and ongoing socialization, including safely exposing your dog to a variety of people and situations every day, from a young age, at a pace that builds confidence and life skills. If you rescue an unsocialized dog, work with a **fear-free trainer** to help your dog reach their maximum potential in terms of feeling comfortable around other animals and humans.

However, many dogs never gain the social skills needed to feel safe or be trustworthy around certain people or animals, particularly if they've been abused or weren't socialized adequately during their sensitive periods, earlier in life. This is why it's also important to respect your dog's space and understand that certain behaviors we enjoy as humans, such as hugging, are unnatural for canines.

Provide the level of touch that brings the most calm and comfort to your pup. Some dogs prefer to sit by you but not have direct contact. Some dogs love to have their ears scratched and some dogs prefer not to have their heads touched. Respecting all of our family members' right to choose the type of physical touch they want is important for building trust and minimizing stress and fear-based reaction in our pets.

If you're with an unfamiliar dog, always let him initiate the contact instead of the other way around — and teach children this rule as well. Even with your own dog, it's important to know their boundaries and not put them in a situation where they may feel unsafe. Even socialized, well-behaved dogs can lash out if they find themselves in an overly stressful situation.

If you're living with a dog who suffers from ongoing anxiety or fear of strangers, look up **The Yellow Dog Project**. This organization promotes the identification of these dogs from a distance by using a yellow ribbon on a leash, which I wholeheartedly endorse. If you see a dog with a yellow ribbon or orange bandana on its leash or collar, it's a sign the dog should not be approached. If you have a pet with a behavior issue, addressing it immediately always yields the best results. Find a vet-certified veterinary behaviorist **here**.

## Sources and References

<sup>1,2,3,5,6,7,11</sup> [Phys.org June 13, 2023](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Whole Dog Journal August 25, 2022](#)

<sup>8,10,12</sup> [Centre for Human Animal Studies, Edge Hill University, Public Perceptions of Dangerous Dogs and Dog Risk](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Gov.UK Controlling your dog in public](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Psychology Today April 10, 2023](#)

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