

## Dogs Often Do This Just Before They Bite – Can You Spot the Tipoffs?

Body language tells most of a story, and that's true for a dog that's about to pounce and bite too. You should know these 3 signs - and teach them to your kids and grandkids - along with the 5 steps needed to defuse a hot, angry situation. It could avoid a scary bite.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's National Dog Bite Prevention Week (April 9 to April 15)
- Each year 4.5 million people in the U.S. are bitten by dogs; children are the most common victims
- Signs a dog may be about to bite include suddenly freezing in place, standing with legs splayed and head low while looking at you, curling the lip to show teeth
- There are many things dog guardians can do to prevent their pet from becoming a biter
- Lifelong learning, socialization and mental stimulation are necessary to insure your dog remains well-balanced and well-behaved

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 10, 2017.**

For those of you who keep track of dates, the annual National Dog Bite Prevention Week has been permanently changed from the third week in May to the second full week in April.

"It is never too early to prevent dog bites," said Dr. Tom Meyer, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

*"Moving up the time frame to the early warm days of spring expands our opportunity to work with schools and communities to educate children on how to stay safe with and around dogs."<sup>1</sup>*

Dog bites hurt both physically and emotionally. The United States Postal Service (USPS), a member of the National Dog Bite Prevention Week Coalition, recorded over 6,500 bites to postal carriers during 2015 alone.

Dog bites can be costly as well. State Farm Insurance, also a member of the coalition, paid nearly \$1 billion in accident-related claims involving a dog over the last decade.

### 6 Fast Facts About Dog Bites

According to the AVMA:<sup>2</sup>

- Each year, over 4.5 million people in the U.S. are bitten by dogs
- Almost 1 in 5 people bitten by dogs require medical attention
- More than 800,000 Americans receive medical attention for dog bites each year; at least half of them are children
- Children are, by far, the most common victims of dog bites and are far more likely to be severely injured
- Most dog bites affecting young children occur during everyday activities and while interacting with familiar dogs
- Senior citizens are the second most common dog bite victims

## Learn to Stay Safe

Be careful when approaching a strange dog. Don't try to pet any dog before he sees you and sniffs you. Don't turn your back to an unfamiliar dog or try to run away. The natural instinct of many dogs will be to give chase.

Don't attempt to interact with a **dog who is sleeping, eating, playing with a toy or bone** or a mother who is with her puppies. Three signs a dog is about to bite:

1. She suddenly freezes and holds her body rigid
2. She stands with her front legs splayed and her head low, looking at you
3. She curls her lip and shows her teeth

Five things to do if you feel a dog is a threat:

1. Stand motionless with your hands at your sides
2. Avoid eye contact with the dog
3. If the dog loses interest, back away slowly
4. If the dog comes at you anyway, offer him anything you're holding — a purse or jacket, for example — or anything that may distract him
5. If you wind up on the ground, curl into a ball, put your hands over your ears and stay still — resist the urge to yell, scream or move around

## How to Prevent Your Dog From Becoming a Biter

- Research the type of dog that would be best suited to your family and lifestyle before selecting a pet. Impulse adoptions or purchases are very often a regrettable decision.

If this is your first dog, also consider talking with a veterinarian, a well-informed shelter or rescue employee, a reputable breeder or other knowledgeable person.

- Insure your dog is well-socialized and trained to respond consistently to basic obedience commands like sit, stay, no and come. Appropriate and lifelong socialization is the most important thing you can do to reduce the risk of behavior problems.

The earlier you start socialization, the better. I recommend starting at 8 weeks and continuing through the pup's first year of life, with daily opportunities to meet new people and pets, and weekly positive training classes.

- Provide your dog with plenty of opportunities to exercise. Not only is regular intense exercise necessary for physical conditioning, it also provides the mental stimulation every dog needs to be well-balanced.
- Playtime is important, but you should avoid games that are over-stimulating to your dog or that pit him against you, like wrestling or overly aggressive tug-of-war. And never put your dog in a situation where he feels taunted or threatened.
- Always use a leash when you're out in public with your pet. And remember that it's not enough to simply put a leash or harness on a large dog with unpredictable behavior. You must be able to control him regardless of who or what he encounters.

If you can't, it's time for additional positive obedience training, and in the meantime, dog-walking duties should go to the person in your household who can successfully maintain control of your pet in public.

- If you allow your dog out alone in a fenced yard, make sure gates are secure and there are no other escape routes available. If she's a jumper, your fence must be higher than she can jump.

If she's a digger or chewer, you'll need to take whatever precautions are necessary to insure she isn't able to tunnel her way out of your yard.

- Take proactive care of your pet's nutrition status. Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet. Feeding unbalanced homemade diets (that are usually deficient in tryptophan and essential fatty acids) can lead to nutritionally-related cognitive issues and aggression in some breeds.

If you don't know if the diet you're feeding is balanced, I recommend feeding a commercially available fresh food diet that has been balanced for you. Also minimize topical pesticide applications for fleas and ticks and take your dog for annual wellness visits with your veterinarian.

- Proceed with caution when it comes to vaccinating your pet. Evidence is mounting that the **rabies vaccine** in particular is contributing to aggression in some dogs. Since rabies vaccines are required by law, insist on the three-year vaccine and avoid the one-year shot.

I also recommend you ask your **holistic veterinarian** for the homeopathic rabies vaccine detox Lyssin after each rabies vaccine.

- Also, discuss with your vet the best time to spay or neuter your dog. Beyond reproductive concerns, intact, untrained pets are sometimes more aggressive than animals that have been neutered and well-socialized.

I do not recommend leaving a dog with aggressive tendencies intact, but I also don't advocate a cookie-cutter approach to neutering all puppies. Timing of this procedure is critical, and should be decided based on each dog's health status and personality.

- Teach children — yours and any others who come around your dog — how to behave with an animal. Children are by far the most frequent victims of dog bites. They must learn to be both cautious and respectful in the presence of any dog, including their own. And never under any circumstances leave a baby or small child alone with a dog.

## Additional Tips

Just as a child's behavior is different than an adult's, a **puppy's behavior** will change as he matures. As he develops physically and socially, his conduct will also transform in subtle and perhaps not-so-subtle ways. Don't assume, even if you've done an excellent job socializing and training him, that he's a "finished product."

Lifelong learning, socialization and mental stimulation are essential if your pet is to become and remain a balanced individual. Ongoing training and proactive positive reinforcement behavior modification when a problem might be developing will help prevent any escalating issues of aggressiveness.

Young dogs don't grow out of behavior problems, they only escalate, so the sooner you identify and address unwanted behaviors, the sooner you can correct them. Dogs often need a refresher obedience or socialization course between 2 to 3 years of age. If you aren't completely pleased with any of your dog's behaviors, stick with training until she gets there.

If you adopt a dog, especially a puppy, during the colder months of the year, he'll need to be socialized once warm weather arrives to all the sights, sounds and other stimuli of summer. However, socialization to other dogs and humans can't wait; begin puppy classes immediately after the puppy comes home, regardless of what season it is.

Dog bites are more common in hot weather. This is probably because more children are outdoors playing with their pets, offering more opportunities for negative experiences to occur under the right circumstances.

## Sources and References

[Postal Employee Network Postal News March 8, 2017](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Veterinary Practice News, March 8, 2017](#)

<sup>2</sup> [AVMA](#)

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