

How to Keep Your Child Safe From Dog Bites

Discover essential dog body language cues to watch for and understand the subtle signs that can help prevent accidents. By learning these key indicators, you can ensure a safer environment for your child and foster positive interactions between your family and your pet.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Every year, more than 4.5 million people suffer from a dog bite, with more than 800,000 of them requiring medical attention
- Most dog bites are avoidable by paying attention to a dog's warning signs — and heeding them
- Often, bites can be prevented by learning some common signs that a dog wants to be left alone. Understanding your dog's body language is critical
- As a pet guardian, you can do your part to prevent dog bites by ensuring your dog is well-socialized as a puppy, has regular opportunities to have safe and enjoyable interactions with other animals and people throughout life and removing them from situations that are making them stressed or anxious
- 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, so be sure to respect that

Every year, more than 4.5 million people suffer from a dog bite, with more than 800,000 of them requiring medical attention.¹ Most of them, however, are avoidable by paying attention to a dog's warning signs — and heeding them.

Most dog bites happen to children while they're interacting with dogs they're familiar with.² This is likely because children may intrude on a dog's space, or play in a way that frightens them, but not understand the warning signs that it's time to back off. Supervising children around dogs — even family dogs — is therefore one of the most important ways to prevent a tragedy from happening.

Dogs Usually Bite in Reaction to a Trigger

Most of the time, dogs don't bite without warning or some type of provocation. However, what comes across as a threat to your dog may not always be obvious. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA):³

"Dogs bite for a variety of reasons, but most commonly as a reaction to something. If the dog finds itself in a stressful situation, it may bite to defend itself or its territory. Dogs can bite because they are scared or have been startled. They can bite because they feel threatened. They can bite to protect something that is valuable to them, like their puppies, their food or a toy."

Dogs might bite because they aren't feeling well. They could be sick or sore due to injury or illness and might want to be left alone. Dogs also might nip and bite during play. Even though nipping during play might be fun for the dog, it can be dangerous for people."

Often, however, it's a misunderstanding between dogs and people that leads to a bite taking place. 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. As noted in Psychology Today:⁴

"Dogs are always communicating, just as people are. Sometimes that communication is clear. Few might go ahead and pet a barking and growling dog, even if the handler says, 'It's OK.' However, what if the handler says, 'It's OK' but the dog is saying, 'It's not OK'? The dog is standing stiffly and refuses to look at the person who wants to pet them — the dog is unmistakably saying, 'I'd rather not interact right now,' as is the growling dog.

We all communicate differently. If a stranger with whom we don't want to have an exchange approaches, some of us may walk the other way while others may hold their ground and say, 'Go away, please.' Still others may pretty much ignore the stranger. Similarly, individual dogs also communicate differently. What's more, being on a leash, they don't have the option to walk away."

Understanding Dog Body Language

Many dog bites can be prevented by learning some common forms of dog body language. Your dog's mouth, for instance, reveals valuable clues about her state of mind. A tense mouth that's slowly closed and has lines around it is an indication of aggression — often as part of the freeze sequence that occurs before a bite.⁵

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. "This may be part of a pre-aggression 'freeze' where the dog goes completely still," Pat Miller, Whole Dog Journal's training editor, explained. "If this warning is ignored, the dog is likely to bite."⁶

Whale eye, which describes the white portion of the eye showing at the corner or rim, is another sign to be aware of, as it's often a sign of anxiety. Whale eye occurs when your dog is looking sideways but keeping his nose pointed forward, which may occur while he's keeping his nose pointed at a resource, like food, but evaluating his surroundings for threats.⁷

If whale eye occurs along with aggressive body signals, it should be taken as such, but if not, it could just be a sign of playfulness. Other, often subtle, signs of fear and anxiety in dogs follow.⁸ If you notice these, the dog probably isn't interested in interacting, so don't approach or try to pet the dog.

- Tucked tail
- Yawning
- Lip licking
- 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

While sometimes it's obvious when a dog doesn't want to be pet, other times it's not as obvious. This is why it's so important to pay close attention to the animal's behavior and cues — and always ask the owner before petting a dog you don't know. AVMA notes:⁹

"We can't always read a dog's body language accurately. Dogs, just like people, have their own, unique personalities, and they don't all express themselves in the same way. One dog wagging its tail might mean that the animal is happy to see you or wants to play. The same gesture in another dog might mean that it's anxious or nervous."

Proper Socialization Helps Prevent Bites

As a pet guardian, you can do your part to prevent dog bites by ensuring your dog is well-socialized and trained to respond consistently to basic obedience commands like sit, stay, no and come. Early, proper and ongoing socialization is the most important thing you can do to reduce the risk of behavior problems and aggression down the road.

Aside from proper socialization, recognize risky situations and remove your dog from them before a bite occurs. For instance, be present if your dog is interacting with unfamiliar people. If she seems anxious or agitated, bring her to quiet, safe spot to calm down. Always supervise interactions between your dog and children, and don't force her to stay in a situation that's making her uncomfortable.

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, recognizing many dogs never gain the social skills needed to feel safe or be trustworthy around certain people or animals. Knowing and respecting your dog's boundaries is critical, in terms of not putting your dog in a situation where she feels the need to defend herself.

Above all else, respect your dog's space and understand that certain behaviors we enjoy as humans, such as hugging, are unnatural for canines. While some dogs tolerate it and even enjoy it, others won't. A good rule of thumb to prevent negative interactions, including dog bites, is to let your dog initiate contact most of the time, rather than invading her personal space.

Be aware, too, that some dogs have anxiety and fear being approached by strangers, in general. There's an organization trying to promote the identification of these dogs from a distance by using a yellow ribbon on a leash, through the **The Yellow Dog Project**, 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, so be sure to respect that.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,9} [AVMA, Dog bite prevention](#)

^{4,8} [Psychology Today April 10, 2023](#)

^{5,6,7} [Whole Dog Journal August 25, 2022](#)
