

## Safe Kids/Safe Dogs

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**K**aren Peak, West Wind Dog Training, is a dog trainer with an agenda—preventing dog bites to children. She spends much of her free time educating parents, children, and dog owners with her Safe Kids/Safe Dogs program. What follows are her valuable insights into what causes dog bites and how to prevent them.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), each year in the United States, dog bites are responsible for close to 4.7 million injuries (800,000 of which require medical care), approximately 17 deaths, and about 914 hospital ED visits per day. Boys ages 5 to 9 years have the highest incidence of being bitten by dogs. The CDC also states that the odds of a dog-bite victim being a child are 3.2 to 1, with the majority of bites occurring at the family home or in a familiar place. Dog bites are the second most commonly seen injury to children in hospital emergency departments after baseball and softball injuries.<sup>1,2</sup> Children have a higher chance of being bitten in the face because of their short stature. Dog bites are one of the top reasons, if not the top reason, a child may require some form of reconstructive plastic surgery to repair facial injuries.

According to the Washington Animal Foundation (an organization in Washington State involved in teaching responsible dog ownership and the creation of fair dog laws), this is a list of dog-related human fatalities in the United States from January to December 2001, and the breeds responsible: rottweiler (6), Labrador retriever (2), Pomeranian (2), German shepherd (2), chow (1), wolf hybrid (1), Akita (1), Doberman Pinscher (1), beagle (1), Presa Canario (2), American pit bull terrier (1), and mixed breeds (4).\*

\*Used with permission of Glen Bui.

Dogs generally do not become aggressive or begin to bite overnight unless there is an underlying medical condition. Often, there are warning signs long before a tragedy occurs. Children may behave around dogs in a way that encourages biting. Many times, bites in children are caused by a combination of: children not knowing puppy and dog safety; improper or nonexistent socializing and training of puppies and dogs; improper supervision; and families inadvertently teaching that biting—even in play—is acceptable. Through education of children, parents, and dog owners, we can decrease the number of dog bites our children sustain.

Basic dog instincts include the “chase drive” (play/prey drive and fight/flight). Our actions (in particular, a child’s actions) may encourage a dog to bite while playing, through fear, or even anger. (Dogs do not view anger as humans do, but when talking to children, keep it at a child’s level).

*Do not approach a dog if you are eating or have food in your hands. The dog may try to take the food and you could get nipped unintentionally. If you have just eaten, wash your hands.*

The breed of dog is not the real concern. It is how the dog was raised, trained, and socialized by the owner, combined with how a child behaves around a dog, that might cause a dog to bite. ANY DOG CAN BITE no matter how cute and cuddly it looks. Children often act in such a way that makes dogs either view them as objects, as equals instead of as leaders, or as threats.

Children are often at eye level to the dog, have higher pitched voices, move quickly, and run and scream.

Tell children to do the following if a loose dog approaches them:

- Get off your bike or skateboard and put it down.
- Stand still, hug yourself, and play “Tree.”
- Avoid eye contact (staring into the eyes may make a dog feel threatened). Look at the ground in front of the dog, but make sure the dog is visible.
- Do not scream or run away—the dog may decide to chase. (No one can outrun a dog; even small dogs are

faster than most people. And most dogs can catch someone on a bike as well.)

- If the child stays still, chances are the dog will lose interest and walk away. If the dog acts threateningly (a threatening posture—up on toes, hackles raised, growling, and lips raised with the tail straight out, which may be waving slowly, and ears thrust forward or pinned back), hold a bag or jacket between you and the dog in case the dog lunges. If the dog lunges, try to get the item into the dog’s mouth. If the dog jumps, roll into a ball, chin to knees, fingers laced behind neck, and play “Turtle.” This posture protects the face, neck, and belly more. The dog may walk away. If the dog does not leave, call for help.

Teach children how to approach a dog:

- Never approach a loose dog; inform an adult about the dog so he or she can call animal control.
- Never run up to a dog—even one you know. The animal could startle and nip.
- Do not approach a dog if you are eating or have food in your hands. The dog may try to take the food and you could get nipped unintentionally. If you have just eaten, wash your hands.
- Walk calmly up to the dog and owner. Stop a few feet away so the dog cannot reach you and ASK permission to pat the dog. If permission is given, hold your hand to the dog in a fist with the back of your hand facing the dog and allow the dog to approach and sniff. Do not barge up to the dog; you may make him or her feel nervous.
- For puppies and small dogs, crouch down; you will be less threatening.
- Do not stare into the dog’s eyes, jerk away, squeal, or jump, which could upset the dog or excite him into nipping.
- REMAIN CALM.
- If permission to pat the dog is not given, say “Thank you” and walk away. NEVER grab a dog as it passes—the dog could be startled and nip. No means no.
- If the dog acts afraid (tail tucked, ears pinned back, hackles raised, backing away, possibly snarling and trembling), even if the owner says it is okay to pat the

dog, DO NOT. The dog is scared and scared dogs may nip. Just because the owner says it is fine to pat the dog does not mean it really is.

- Pat a dog under its chin or on the back or shoulder. Reaching up and over a dog's face to pat the head may make the dog nervous.
- When you are done petting the dog, thank the owner and WALK away.

*If the dog acts threateningly... hold a bag or jacket between you and the dog in case the dog lunges. If the dog lunges, try to get the item into the dog's mouth. If the dog jumps, roll into a ball, chin to knees, fingers laced behind neck, and play "Turtle."*

Most often children will be bitten by a dog they know. Behavior such as wrestling with a dog, allowing a dog to chase and tackle, dangling toys or food for a dog to jump and grab, playing tug with a rope or towel, or letting puppies bite and tug on hands, fingers, clothes, or feet can teach a dog that it is okay to bite. Examples of safer interaction with the family dog include:

- Hide-and-seek. Toss a toy when it is found to reward the dog, or hide a favorite toy and encourage the dog to find it.
- Fetch. Do not let the game turn into a tugging match to get the toy back.
- Set up opaque plastic cups and put treats under one or two and let the dog find them.
- Set up obstacle courses.
- Teach a dog to run with you, not to chase. If the dog starts to jump and nip, STOP, settle the dog, and walk for a bit. Dogs can run with us and have fun but should NOT chase or tackle us.
- Never take toys or food from a dog. If the dog has something he should not have, let an adult get it away.
- Never approach a dog with puppies unless there is an adult to help you.
- Make sure the dog is well-trained and socialized.

## REFERENCES

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**Contributions** for this column are welcomed and encouraged. Submissions should be sent to:

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