

Good dogs don't bite children, do they?

By: MADELINE GABRIEL - for the North County Times

Have you ever marveled at how good your dog is with children? Great! This article is for you and your wonderful dog!

Historical bite statistics project that more than 50 percent of our children will be bitten by dogs before age 12, most often by a dog they know. Even though dog bites rarely cause serious injury, families are distraught and the dogs often lose their homes.

You may be thinking, "Sure, that's because of all those 'bad dogs.' Lucky for me, I have a good dog and don't have to worry about that."

Think again.

Most of the cases I see involve a dog no one expected to bite. When was the last time you heard a parent say, "Oh yeah, I totally knew my dog was dangerous and I let the kids play with him anyway"?

Instead, a call usually begins with: "The bite came out of the blue! He was always so good with the baby," followed by a list of all the various things that the dog has put up with without apparent complaint.

This is a clear case of The Curse of a Good Dog.

Most dogs known to be uncomfortable with small children are protected and treated with caution. It's the "good dogs" that are generally left to fend for themselves.

It's easy to see how this happens. A small child does something with the dog and the dog does not object. Parents think, "What a good dog!" and are lulled into a false sense of security and a resultant lack of vigilance in guiding dog and child interactions.

What we forget is that all dogs, even good dogs, have limits to their tolerance. Every action by a child that surprises, frightens, annoys, hurts or otherwise bothers a dog is, essentially, a withdrawal from that "bank account" of goodwill. At some point, this balance dips low, maybe on a bad day or maybe after a longer history of incursions, and that's when you see the growl or snap or bite.

Consider, too, that The Curse of a Good Dog has implications for the child, as well. The child is acquiring unsafe habits of behavior around all dogs, not just this particular dog. Most dogs actively dislike hugs, kisses, kids pushing them or reaching for their toys, pulling their fur or disturbing them while sleeping -- even if your own good dog has never objected. What your child does with your dog is what he will do with other dogs.

Instead of expecting more and more of our good dogs, let's honor their forbearance with our protection. Keep your good dog good!

- Look for opportunities to turn withdrawals into deposits. Sure, all kids do some things that are annoying to dogs. Your job is to make it worth your dog's while. Look at your dog, praise him and give him a treat. Every time. This builds your dog's goodwill balance and prompts him to look to you for guidance when disturbed or startled.

- Learn the body language of a worried dog and contrast with how your dog looks when happy or relaxed. Unless you have a suggestion box for your dog to use, body language is all he has got. If you miss the subtle signs, your dog has no choice but to make it more obvious. Luckily, once you know what to look for, you can't miss what your dog is telling you.

- Teach your children true respect and empathy for animals by clearly supporting the animal's likes and dislikes. If your child loves your dog, it's important to learn to show that love in a way the animal truly appreciates. Dogs love children they can feel safe around. Save the hugs and kisses for Grandma.

Oddly enough, we get to have our happily ever after with dogs and children when we stop assuming that a good dog is the most important part of the equation.

Further references: "Happy Kids, Happy Dogs" by Barbara Schumannfang and "Dogs Bite (but Balloons and Slippers Are More Dangerous)" by Janis Bradley; for body language and safety tips: www.doggonesafe.com; for lists of what dogs do and do not like to do with children: www.topnotchdog.com.

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