

## ***"My Dog Just Bit a Child!"***

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This article may be a "hard pill" to swallow, but *swallow it we must* if we are going to advocate for the health and well being of the animals and children. Dog bites to children can be chilling. They can range from a simple nip to facial disfigurement to death. Having worked in emergency health care I have had the opportunity to observe my share of dog bite injuries and appreciate their cause. The purpose of this short article is to enhance knowledge of this issue and to aid in the management and prevention of potential dog bites to children.

This is a message that needs *high priority* in animal advocacy: Dog bites are not a *dog* problem; they are a *people* problem. Dog bites occur because of human complacency and negligence. Guess who takes the ultimate fall.

"Dog attacks are the No.1 public health problem of children, with more than half of children bitten by age twelve." (Dr. Freeman, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association). The CDC reports that dog bites to children "exceed the total number of cases of measles, whooping cough and mumps each year." Most often it is the family pet that bites a neighborhood child.

I have lost count of the number of times I have received a call and listened to the panic in the anxious exclamation, *"My Dog Just Bit a Child!"* If I didn't exercise restraint with these calls, I might respond with something like... "Imagine that!" "What a surprise!" It used to be when a child was bitten, the response was, "Well, what did he do to the dog?" Now the response is something like, "That dog's not right. We need to get rid of it."

O.K. We bring a dog into our home, the dog has teeth and under inviting circumstances the dog will bite. It shouldn't be that surprising. A dog biting is as natural as a person making a reactive swipe at a stinging insect hovering around their face, (which I would suggest you do, not) or taking a swing at someone assaulting us. Some people use guns, knives or fists. Dogs have teeth. What should we expect? Here is the heart of the issue: Expecting dogs to act like dogs will save their lives. Expecting a dog to act like something *other* than a dog will get them relinquished and killed. This is the bottom line.

How does this happen? It happens because we have become so disconnected from the intuitive ability to observe and listen to the animals around us that we are unable to recognize the messages they are telling us with their behavior. On this same side of the coin, we have lost the thoughtfulness to behave in a non-threatening way around them that respects their inherent nature to perceive threats and intimidation.

Two adult women entered through a gate into their brother's fenced-in backyard at night (each wearing a fox coat - I am saddened to say) in which there are 2 barking German

shepherds warning them to stay out. They were startled that the dogs lunged and ripped at their coats. Imagine that.

A neighborhood child comes over to your home to play and is allowed to hug your dog. Although your dog is familiar with your own children hugging him, the dog is not familiar with another child doing so. Does a little child recognize the wide open eyes, the stiffening body, the sound from deep in the throat, if any, or even the notion that dogs get nervous when their space is invaded by other unfamiliar animals?

A newly adopted and unsupervised dog is in a home with strange children at the screen door staring through at the barking dog. Do they know that their staring, sounds and movements appear threatening to the dog who reacts by biting at them to get them away?

Acquiring a dog is a huge responsibility and too often the romance of bringing the dog home fades quickly and their presence becomes incidental and the monitoring becomes casual. Living with a dog requires realistic expectations; much needed education and *vigilante* supervision.

Larger dogs, especially, require more boundary management with younger children primarily because their faces are at equal levels. Little dogs bite ankles, big dogs bite faces. Big and little dogs bite and nip at other dogs' heads and faces in natural and ritualistic interactions. They are condemned and it is unacceptable when this behavior is demonstrated at the face or hands of child. We want our dog to have human cognition and be able to differentiate between one little animal and another. When a dog is nervous or uncomfortable with the proximity of another dog or a child, their behavior will not differentiate between the two.

Two major indicators that influence a dog's biting are: 1) If it is spayed or neutered (an unsterilized dog is three times more likely to bite than a neutered animal) and, 2) the degree of training and socialization. The second is more significant than the first. There is no difference between the bites of a sterilized vs. an unsterilized dog. Calculated and thoughtful socialization is absolutely imperative for a safer dog. It means getting the dog out to meet *lots* of different peoples and managing the dog's experiences so that all these encounters are as positive and enjoyable as possible. It means taking the responsibility to protect the dog from having to defend itself from what it perceives as a threatening experience. It also means taking the precautions of not allowing the dog to rehearse the behaviors that, (although they are normal dog behaviors) will get them relinquished and/or euthanized.

Training programs that specifically emphasize the development of a dog's survival skills and the person's awareness of this necessity should be encouraged upon the first acquisition of the dog.

Personally, I would rather have a well-trained and well-socialized pit bull or rotweiller than an untrained and unsocialized poodle. *It is not the breed of dog that is dangerous; it is the attitude of the person responsible for the dog.*

For the health and safety of children and dogs, let's make an effort to educate both ourselves and new dog adopters that expectations should be realistic, that dogs exhibit dog behavior and *all* dogs will bite under the right circumstances. In our behavior-training program, one of the first habits we get adopters to embrace is how to answer this question that is often posed by children and others, "Does your dog bite?" We encourage either of two answers, 1) "All dogs bite," or, 2) "He has teeth."

If we have a dog who is nervous and tentative with children, we need to be sure that the dog is not re-exposed to this seemingly threatening scenario and protect him from children who would cause him the need to re-experience that defensive emotion.

We will have come a long way in our maturity when we hear the voice on the other end of the phone saying, (instead of, "My dog just bit a child,") rather. "I am responsible for allowing a child to be bitten by the dog". "I am at fault."

The *best* message, of course, on the other end of the phone is, "I have made a special effort to socialize my dog with all kinds of people. I not only have made sure he hasn't been assaulted or intimidated by little children, I've made a special effort to be sure that his experience with children has been only positive ~ and he's doing great!"

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Warren's interest is to help people understand how dogs learn so that people and dogs can enjoy a relationship of mutual *trust* and *respect* and to reduce the number of abandoned and relinquished animals.

[For information on training classes, please click here.](#)