

How to prevent dog bites in children

Most children are attracted to animals and approach them willingly — even when the animal is unfamiliar. Unfortunately, the encounter doesn't always go well. Three quarters of a million children are bitten by animals every year — usually by a dog they know, in or near the child's home. Even children who don't have a dog at home are likely to meet one at a neighbor's house, or when visiting relatives. Following these guidelines will help protect your child from bites.

Monitor children's interactions with pets closely. Teaching children to be cautious around pets is very important. Pets are often treated as members of the family, but we need to teach children that dogs are a separate species with their own ways of behaving and communicating. Children sometimes disregard the warning signs dogs give by their posture, staring, or barking, and approach a frightened or aggressive dog. Many children are bitten when they get too close to a dog that is fenced in or chained. And so we need to teach children that all animals — not just unfamiliar ones, but family and neighborhood dogs as well — can be dangerous. Young children should be closely monitored when interacting with any dog and should never be left alone with a dog.

Choose a non-aggressive dog for the family. It's a lot easier to pick a suitable pet than to try to make a pet suitable for children. Many books and articles on dogs include protocols that can help you pick an animal that is not aggressive.. Obviously, a dog that reacts aggressively to being handled is not a good choice. But a friendly and apparently submissive puppy will not necessarily grow up to be a non-aggressive mature dog. In general, male dogs — especially un-neutered young animals — are more aggressive than females; they are responsible for most dog bites. Because of horrible past incidences, we feel strongly that young child should be around aggressive dogs. The best course is to plan on having any have the animal you choose neutered. Large breeds such as German shepherds, chows, pit bulls, Akitas, Dobermans, and rottweilers are more likely than others to attack children; some small breeds — Chihuahuas, dachshunds, and terriers, for example — also have a tendency to bite. Generally, know that mutts and mixed breeds tend to have a smoother temperament than pure breeds. Statistically, German Shepherds are the breed with the highest attack rates on children.

Observe your dog for dominance-aggression. Dogs reach behavioral maturity at 2 to 3 years of age, and at this time may begin to demonstrate aggressive, dominant behavior toward family members in order to achieve higher social status. When your child hugs or pets the dog, or stares at him, the dog may interpret the child's actions as a bid for dominance and react with aggression. This can happen even with a dog that has previously been friendly. As your dog (and your child) grows up, watch for possible signs of aggression such as growling, snapping, or barking. If you see this behavior, bring the problem to your veterinarian's attention promptly. Taking the dog to obedience school does not necessarily prevent this kind of dominance-aggression, but it can help reinforce the dog's sense of its subordinate social position to all family members.

Teach your dog to be submissive. Wild dogs live in packs with a strict social order; when a dog lives with a human family, the owners need to teach the dog its place in the family structure. A dog that responds to commands like No and Stay, and understands that its place is subordinate to all family members, will be a wonderful pet and unlikely to cause harm to any family member. Procedures for teaching your dog to be submissive can be found in many books on dog training or in instructions from your veterinarian.

Take preventive steps. For safety's sake, teach your child these rules of dog safety:

- Never approach a dog that is chained, tied up, in a pen, or behind a fence
- Don't come close to a barking dog, even if it is wagging its tail
- Never take a toy or food from a dog
- Never disturb a sleeping dog
- Never discipline a dog by hitting it
- Never put your face near the mouth of any dog other than your family pet