

Because so many of us share our homes with dogs and think of them as members of the family, it is easy to forget that they are animals. They have a different language than we do and they interpret and react to things differently than we do. In order to live safely with our companions, we need to understand how they communicate.

Approximately 4.7 million dog bites are reported every year in this country. They are the second leading cause of injury to children: about 70% of dog bites happen to kids. The majority of dog bites occur to people who are not strangers to the dog. Because of this, it is important to practice safe behavior around all dogs, including those we share our homes with. This does not mean that most dogs are vicious; it simply means that this is how dogs handle certain situations. They are animals, without a voice to report injustices, but with a communication system of gestures that we need to recognize and respect.

What should every dog owner do to prevent their dogs from biting?

- Choose an appropriate dog for your family. A frequent mistake many new dog owners make is choosing a puppy based on looks or the assumption that there is a perfect “family dog” breed. It is worth researching different breeds, as long as you understand that breed standards are general and individual dogs have distinct personalities. One of the great benefits to adoption is that many shelters and rescue groups capture personality profiles on intake and complete behavior assessments on their animals prior to making them available for adoption. This provides potential adopters with very useful information on a dog’s personality and lifestyle in its first home.

Dogs that are tolerant and comfortable being handled, without signs of food or possession aggression, make appropriate family pets. If you have children, teach your children appropriate behavior around the dog and make sure that their interactions are supervised. Children should never walk the family dog alone. While your dog may be easy to walk on leash, there is the risk that they come in contact with an off-leash dog.

- Socialize your dog. Dogs that have an opportunity to spend time with different people in different situations are less likely to be nervous in normal circumstances.

- Train your dog. Give your dog the tools to become a great family member by teaching him basic manners. It’s important that everyone in the family be on board and help with your dog’s education. Even experienced owners can benefit from a training class!

- Spay or neuter you dog. Dogs that are altered are about three times less likely to bite than intact dogs.

- Teach your dog appropriate behavior. Reward your dog for his “good” behaviors. Do not reinforce aggressive behavior by teaching your dog to chase or play rough, even in fun. Your dog can’t tell the difference between real-life and play, and will interpret this as you approving of his actions.

- Be a responsible dog owner. Make sure your dog is licensed in your town and up-to-date on his rabies vaccine. For everyone’s safety, abide by leash laws so that your dog is never roaming alone. Make your dog a member of your family; dogs that spend a great deal of time alone in the

backyard or tied on a chain often become dangerous. Dogs that are well-socialized and supervised are much less likely to bite.

How can I avoid being bitten by a dog (and teach my children to avoid bites)?

It is never safe to approach a strange dog, especially when tied in a yard or behind a fence. Always assume that a dog who doesn't know you may see you as an intruder or a threat. If you encounter a strange dog, do not turn your back and run away. Many dogs have a prey drive and their instinct will be to chase and catch you. It is safer to look forward (not into the dog's eyes) and back away slowly.

If a dog strange knocks you or your child over, it is best to remain quiet and curl into a ball with your face and hands hidden. Most dogs will sniff you and walk away. Screaming and running will excite a high energy dog and cause them to chase.

Even for dogs we know and with whom we are comfortable, it is important to follow, and teach our children to follow, some basic guidelines.

Never disturb a dog while she's:

- eating
- chewing on a toy
- caring for puppies (not a concern if she's spayed!)
- sleeping
- ill or injured
- nervous or seems afraid

The most important lessons for children to learn are not to chase or tease dogs they know and to avoid dogs they don't know.

What is the best way to greet someone else's dog (and teach my children to do the same)?

Before petting someone else's dog, ask the owner for permission. After getting permission to pet a dog, always let the dog sniff the back of your hand first.

Children should hold their hands in a fist, with the knuckles facing up, so that it doesn't appear that they are offering a treat.

Most dogs are comfortable being stroked under the chin or on the side of the torso. Remind children that they should be careful to avoid a dog's eyes, ears, and mouth when petting them. Many dogs do not like to have their paws or tails handled.

Many of these same rules apply to handling other animals, especially cats. It is always best to teach children that animals do not like "people hugs and kisses", and it is always important to ask for permission before petting or holding another person's animal.