



[www.aranimalclinic.com](http://www.aranimalclinic.com)

## The Basics of Dog Bite Prevention

-Dr. Jacky May

May 19-25<sup>th</sup> was National Dog Bite Prevention Week. We have posted a plethora of excellent articles on the subject on our Facebook page, and it is a pertinent topic for this month's newsletter as well. There are several important components to successful dog bite prevention – learning to recognize the ALL the signs of a dog's distressed body language, knowing what to do when faced with an aggressive or boisterous dog, educating children about interacting with dogs, and knowing how to safely approach unfamiliar dogs.

### Recognizing body language

Almost everyone recognizes that a snarling, growling, lunging dog is a bite risk. **The problem is that not all dogs exhibit such dramatic signs of warning.** Most dogs exhibit far more subtle signs of distress and increasing anxiety in a situation that the **majority** of people do not see or recognize prior to escalating to a bite. **The claim that the dog snapped and bit someone "out of the blue without any warning" is seldom true.** It is much more likely that none of the people present recognized the signs that the dog was displaying and therefore were surprised by the dog's seeming 'sudden' aggression.



Some of the most common subtle signs are yawning when not tired, licking the lips repeatedly, widening of the eyes so that you can see the 'whites' (commonly referred to as whale eye), furrowing the brow, and an overall stiff body posture rather than relaxed. Very few people recognize these more subtle signs of canine distress/discomfort or respond to them.

One of my special pet peeves is watching a dog trying to turn away from a child, and even try to get up and remove themselves from interacting with a child only to have the parents force the dog to sit or lay back down and endure the interaction that they gracefully tried to remove themselves from. Trying to 'get away' should be body language that is easy enough to interpret, but alas all too often even that is ignored.

Dogs will quickly learn what responses are successful in resolving stressful situations for them. **If their range of 'benign' body language is ignored over and over by everyone, but snapping and biting proved to be successful in bringing the stressful situation to an end (from the dog's point of view) then unfortunately the dog will quickly learn to use biting as the more**

**successful tool.** In order to prevent the escalation to more and more aggressive actions by the dog, then the people around them need to make the effort to learn to recognize subtle forms of communication the dog is using. **You cannot prevent a bite if you cannot recognize that that the dog is plainly telling you it is not comfortable in the situation.**

The following are the best links to pictures and videos that do a great job of illustrating distressed dog body language. In this case, the pictures really are worth a thousand words.

[Zoom Room Guide to Dog Body Language](#) – 5 minute video with excellent clear pictures and informative captions

[Common Dog Stress Signals](#) – Liam J Perk's Foundation page, has numerous tabs of great pictures of the common stress postures.

[Signs of Dog Stress](#) – from doggoneseafe.com, an entire set of tabs as well of good pictures and videos showing clearly the more subtle signs that most people do not read well

[Dogs Don't Bite Out of the Blue](#) – excellent set of pictures of stress/anxiety postures in dogs

[The Family Dog Video](#) – What your dog is desperately trying to tell you.

## What to do when faced with an aggressive or overly boisterous dog :

**The old adage "Act like a tree" is perfect for adults and children.** Stand still and tall, fold your arms at your chest or clasp your hands together so you do not inadvertently wave your arms and hands around, and look down at your feet rather than directly at the dog.

Yelling, screaming, flailing your arms around, trying to hit at or kick at the dog, and running are much, much more likely to result in antagonizing the dog further and ending with a severe bite.

If you are running/jogging and the dog flies out to chase you, then you need to realize that you cannot likely out run a dog on your best day. Most dogs chasing in that situation have no real intention of biting, and only intend to make you leave by charging, barking, and growling. So it is best to stop and turn to face them directly and then act like a tree. Once they settle you can back away slowly in a relaxed manner, and once you are far enough away you can turn around and walk calmly farther until you have put them behind you entirely.

What do you do if they do not stop but start leaping at you? Then you turn away and keep your back to them so they cannot get to your face and remain calm while continuing to act like a tree. If they knock you down, curl into a ball with your knees bent and your hands clasped at the back of your neck with your elbows protecting access to your face and neck, and try to remain as calm and non-reactive as possible.

If you run/jog and are faced with aggressive dogs chasing you, consider carrying some pepper or [citronella spray](#) (Used to be one called Direct Stop or Spray Stop, this is its new name and a link), or a police whistle or air horn. Loud noises often startle dogs effectively enough to break their 'run and chase' mindset, long enough for you to be still and stop being a target. Once you have their attention, then use a firm "No" to your advantage. Remember, even though it seems counterintuitive – continuing to run, yelling, hopping around, waving your arms around, or trying to hit at the dog with a stick are the least effective ways to defuse the situation.



[How to 'Be a Tree'](#) – picture and video of how to handle yourself with an loose dog approach.

[What to do if a dog attacks you](#)

## Educating Children :

Children are, by far, the most common victims of dog bites and are far more likely to be severely injured. Most dog bites affecting young children occur during everyday activities and while interacting with familiar dogs. If the adults in the house do not recognize subtle dog body language then you can certainly bet that the children are not recognizing those signs either. Thus the dog escalates their reaction to the situation and the child ends up bitten "out of the blue".

Children age 5-9 are the most likely dog bite victims of all. Also, be aware that two thirds of dog bite injuries to children 4 years old and younger are to the head and neck simply because of their height in relation to the dog. In 86% of bite cases, the dog-child interaction that triggered the bite was initiated by the child.

If you are a parent, then it is very important to educate yourself on the subtle displays of body language by the dog because it is YOUR responsibility to stop any interaction between the child and dog when the dog becomes uncomfortable or stressed. **If you cannot recognize the problem signs then you cannot hope to prevent a bite.** It is unfair and unreasonable to expect a dog to sit around and put up with everything a young child can dish out. The adults in the room need to pay attention and practice prevention, as well as teach the child how interact appropriately with the dog.



**The dog is going to be expected to pay for its mistake with its life if the child is bitten. Educate yourself and your children, so that your family pet can remain a valued beloved member of the household rather than a bad memory for all.**

One needs only look at the overwhelming majority of pictures or videos of children and dogs posted on social media to realize that most parents have not taken the time to educate themselves on dog body language cues of discomfort and stress. Over and over people are holding a camera up and filming a moment in which the dog quite obviously looks uneasy but the adults involved are either unaware or are

too focused on the 'cute' moment to notice. No one is stopping and helping the dog out of the situation, instead they are all laughing and pointing in apparently blissful ignorance of the dog's elevating stress during the interaction.

Fortunately, most stressed dogs do not bite, but isn't it more than a bit ridiculous to let the burden for the outcome of the interaction fall entirely on the dog rather than the thinking adults in the room? Of course it is. **Leaving the outcome entirely to the dog is ridiculous, irresponsible, dangerous, and threatening to life of the dog.**

Children often act unpredictably, and that can lead to increasing anxiety levels for the dog. It is unfair to the dog to demand that it immediately adjust to everything the child may suddenly dish out. All interactions between young children and the dog should be closely monitored by adults. Teach the child what is ok and what is not ok, and allow the dog an area that is off limits to the children (like its crate) so that they can withdraw from interacting if they wish.



Several excellent resources for teaching kids how to interact with dogs :

[How to "Be a Tree"](#)

[Dog Bite Prevention for Parents](#) – by doggonessafe.com

[How to be your dog's hero](#) – specifically on this page scroll down to #3 "When around kids", has a good song video for small children about how to interact well with dogs

[Dog bite prevention and kids](#) – From thesocialk9.com

[Preparing Children to Visit Dogs](#) –

[The Blue Dog Teacher's Toolbox](#) – thebluedog.com has a free teacher's toolbox of materials along with a site full of information geared toward children and dogs. They also have a cd for parents that is reported to be excellent.

[The Family Dog Website](#) – The website has a fair amount of free material amongst it. They also have a training program geared toward kids and family dogs. I have not seen the program, but any blurb or newsletter I have seen of theirs has been very well done, so I suspect the training program is worth it.

## Approaching unfamiliar dogs :

The most common way for people to approach unfamiliar dogs is to rush toward them, exclaiming various unintelligible (to the dog) things in a high loud pitch and then promptly loom over the top of them while shoving a hand in their face and staring directly at them, or worse yet trying to kiss their face. Everything about that description is actually wrong, and unfortunately most people are totally unaware of that.



Just because your dog loves that sort of stuff and is used to it, does **NOT** mean that every dog does. Not every dog in the world can handle strange people rushing up to them and laying hands on them. **Learn to recognize the signs that you are causing a dog distress and discomfort so you can back off before bad things happen.** **YOU** need to recognize them, because most people that own dogs do not even recognize the more subtle signs that their dog is not handling the interaction well.

Do not move toward unfamiliar dogs quickly, but instead move slowly which allows them time to take in the situation and realize that you are not a threat. Speak in a low calming voice, and if you cannot manage that, then actually you are better not to speak at all.

Leaning over the top of a dog can be very frightening to them especially when added with reaching for the top of their heads. Likewise staring directly at them can be intimidating or challenging to many dogs and so is your face coming at theirs quickly. **Part of knowing how best to approach a dog is paying close attention to the dog and knowing the subtle signs of distress.** Their reactions are the best guide as to how well they are taking your approach IF you have educated yourself on what to look for.

**Basically, if the dog is attached to an owner, always ask if you can approach first.** However, no matter what any person has to say, it is up to YOU to pay attention to what the dog you are approaching is saying to YOU ! If you are told that the dog is not good with strangers then STOP trying to interact with the dog and smile and say, "Thank you for telling me." **The most common phrase uttered by adults that are bitten by dogs in a controlled situation is without fail, "No, it's ok all dogs love me!"** No they don't, and that assumption is dangerous to you as well as the animal you are trying to interact with.

If the dog is unsure, just stand there with your side to the dog rather than facing them frontally full on, and do not look directly at them. Give them time to relax and make the first move toward you rather than reaching out to them right away. Most dogs will do better if you can lower your height in their frame of reference by sitting or kneeling down and let them come to you. Do be careful about changing your position if the dog is really unsure because kneeling down or getting back up often involves a lean over them if they are close and that can trigger a bite. Be low key, quiet, and let them make the first moves in your direction. Treats are always a help in making you seem less threatening, and if they will not take them directly then you can toss them nearby.

[How to Meet A Dog](#) – Excellent pictorial page and video by the Liam J Perk Foundation

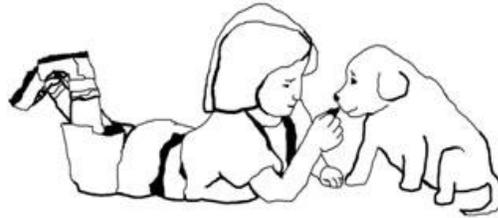
[How to greet a dog properly](#) – Excellent article by Dr. Sophia Yin

[Top Ten Scenarios to Avoid to prevent bites](#)

## A few final points :

If you have a dog exhibiting any sort of aggression please realize that EARLY intervention is the key ! The longer you wait, the longer the dog has to cement the use of that new tool in its behavior toolbox. Most of the time aggression is its own positive reward for dogs and therein lies the problem and the reason it often escalates so quickly. A snarl, growl, and snap usually brings a quick end to whatever situation brought it on (even if it was 'successfully' chasing away the delivery man from the door). Biting worked and all that subtle stuff did not as far as the dog is now concerned. Stepping in earlier rather than later is crucial in dealing with aggression issues.

Forget thinking about which breed won't bite. There is no such thing. Breed actually has very little to do with predicting a dog bite. Socializing, training, and handling have a much bigger role in preventing dog bites. ANY dog can bite with the right (or wrong) stimulation in a situation. Any dog, small or large can cause serious injury. Small dogs very often bite hands, and hand bites are some of the more serious liability and injury causing bites as they often involve joints, tendons, and loss of function.



Finally, if you have a dog known to be a biter, then be responsible about it and do not sit around in denial. Denial is dangerous for everyone, especially your dog. Speak up and tell people not to approach the dog ! Do not be quiet and 'hope for the best'. As the owner of a dog that does not enjoy strangers, I understand how oddly judgmental people can be when you tell them not to pet your dog. They look at you like you have spit on them, mainly because a disturbing number of people in the world are under the delusion that every dog is as open and friendly as their own.

If you have a potential biter, by all means work with them to improve the way they handle themselves in different situations, but openly work on your dog's behalf with others too. Be the dog's advocate so that he or she does not have to deal with the situation all by themselves – no one will be happy when they do, not you, not the stranger, and not the dog either.