

Peer Reviewed

Teaching Clients About Safety with Dogs

It is frustrating when a healthy dog is relinquished or euthanized because of biting. How can I help prevent this problem?

Any dog is capable of biting, including family pets that are loved and pampered. We all know this, yet bites continue to be a significant cause of injury to our clients and their children—the most frequent victims of reported bites. Adults, of course, are bitten as well but numbers are not as clear because most dog bites are not reported to public health authorities. Most bites to children, which in large part are reported because of the need for medical attention, are by dogs they know.¹

The problem of dog bites presents a conundrum for the veterinary profession and for pet owners: We are a society of dog lovers and treat them like members of the family. Yet canine aggression is the most common reason for relinquishment of dogs to shelters and, although numbers have not been reported, for behavior-related euthanasia. Understanding the behavioral basis of dog bites is an important step toward prevention. Veterinarians are an essential piece of this puzzle, with a unique opportunity to help clients understand their dogs' behavior and to prevent or lessen the risk for biting.

CONTINUES

FIND MORE...

See the ACVB/AVSAB Behavior Symposium Capsules on dog bites, page 31 of this issue.



CANINE COMMUNICATION

People and dogs don't speak the same language, sometimes resulting in interactions that people consider friendly but dogs view as threatening. Dogs may also be experiencing subclinical pain and therefore become easily hurt even without rough handling. In some cases it is unwise to kiss, hug, pet, or reach for dogs (even our own). In the parlance of dog language, probably the most important message lost in translation from dog to human is that a dog might not want to interact physically or otherwise at a given moment. Luckily dogs are expressive and social animals, willing to tell us quite a lot, if we listen.

Recently a client came to the behavior clinic with a 3.5-year-old male mixed breed named Beck. Beck had been resting on the sofa when an adult male relative—but not a member of the immediate family—approached him. Beck rolled onto his back at the man's approach, apparently inviting a belly rub. The relative petted Beck's abdomen and the dog seemed to enjoy the interaction. However, as the man stopped petting Beck and moved to the other side of the sofa, the dog stood, pursued, and bit the man's face, ending the evening in the emergency room.

People and dogs don't speak the same language, sometimes resulting in interactions that people consider friendly but dogs view as threatening.

Some general tips about interaction with dogs might help clients to understand their dogs and thus prevent such altercations.

BODY LANGUAGE

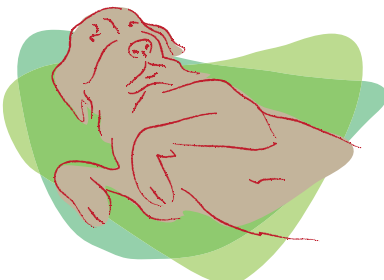
- Yawning is a sign of stress.



Anxious dogs display facial and body language indicative of their emotional state, including yawning, lip-licking, panting, open-

ing their eyes wide and often displaying dilated pupils, pinning back their ears, and turning their heads to avoid eye contact. A frightened dog might simply "freeze" while being petted or hugged, but dogs are more likely to bite during such an interaction. They may appear to enjoy handling but then might lunge and bite as the hand, face, or other human body part is being withdrawn.

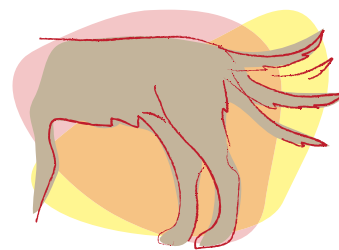
- Rolling onto its back can be a dog's way of saying "STOP."



The simplest way to interpret the situation is to first determine whether the interaction was started by the person or by the dog. If the person approached the dog for the purpose of interaction, the dog is usually telling the person to disengage and walk away. On the other hand, if the dog initiated the interaction by approaching the person and then rolling onto its back, it is probably a solicitation

for attention or play. Look closely at the dog. If its body is stiff and tense, forego touching it. If it is relaxed, perhaps wriggling around, then the interaction was the dog's idea and petting might be fine.

- Tail wagging might not mean the dog is friendly.



A wagging tail says little about whether a dog is friendly, and a tail-wagging dog can still bite. Dogs may wag their tails as a sign of fear, stress, alertness, or arousal as well as happiness. A wagging tail signals that the dog is ready to interact, but how the dog does so can be communicated by the rest of its posture and behavior. Again, a stiff posture and stiffly wagging tail might indicate arousal and even threat. Much of what we understand about dog language depends on its context. While a dog greeting its owners might be excitedly wagging its tail as they enter the house, the same dog might stand still, except for wagging its tail, as it is approached by an unfamiliar child on the street. In the latter situation, it should not be assumed the dog is friendly toward the child.

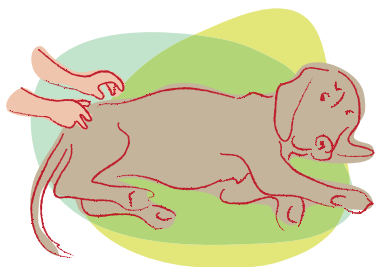
MORE SAFETY TIPS

- Dogs don't always want to befriend strangers.



The conventionally outstretched “making friends” hand might be threatening or irritating to some dogs, especially when it is attached to a person bending toward the dog and making prolonged eye contact. When guests are meeting an unfamiliar dog, the best way to help the dog feel comfortable is to ask them to resist touching, staring at, or reaching toward it. Guests should instead chat with the owner or sit nearby. Dogs that want to interact usually let the guests know. Nevertheless, this observation must be put into context. Beware of the dog that has a history of aggressiveness when it is approached. There can be ambivalence on the dog’s part: “I want to interact with you, but when you reach toward me or over my head, and especially when you touch me, I feel threatened.”

- Let sleeping—or resting—dogs lie.



Sometimes knowing a common adage is a sure bet that it will be ignored. When dogs are sleeping, they are likely to be startled when woken and therefore may bite defensively and quickly. More confusing for pet owners are dogs that are awake but growl when approached or touched. In a recent study, dogs that bit children who knew them (eg, family pets) were most likely to be lying or sitting still at the time of the bite, suggesting that the child approached the dog while it was resting.²

This behavior is particularly likely if the dog is in a den- or nest-like spot, such as on or beneath furniture. In some cases there seems to be a bit of resource-guard-

ing as well—the high-value resource being the couch. Most confusing to owners is the dog that seems fine sitting or lying beside one owner on furniture but growls as the spouse or a child approaches. What is going on? It may be resource-guarding or perhaps there is no place for the dog to go. Often we approach a piece of furniture and yell at the dog to get down, leaving no space for that to happen. It is extremely important to look at these situations from the dog’s perspective.

- Do not move a dog by pulling, pushing, or nudging.



Owners may ask or demand that a resting dog move elsewhere (see above) and, frustrated with lack of compliance, immediately reach to nudge or pull the dog by the collar, eliciting a growl, snap, or bite. Apply common courtesies. You wouldn’t push a friend off the couch, would you? It is safer to move the dog using a verbal cue and still better to lure it with held or tossed food. Long-term success is assured if dogs are taught to move (eg, jump off furniture or go to a particular spot) using positive reinforcement.

- Do not teach a dog to relinquish a possession by unexpectedly taking it away.

Dogs are surprised when food and other items are taken away from them. To a dog, it makes no sense that something clearly in its possession is randomly removed. The first time this occurs, they might be surprised but they may soon

Tx at a Glance

- Observe a dog’s posture, behavior, and other signals to interpret its readiness for interaction.
- Apply the same common courtesy you would give to a friend to your dog.
- Do not teach a dog to relinquish a possession by unexpectedly taking it away.
- Always separate a dog from children or supervise them closely.

When guests are meeting an unfamiliar dog, the best way to help the dog feel comfortable is to ask them to resist touching, staring at, or reaching toward the dog at first. Guests should instead chat with the owner or sit nearby.

GO TO...

cliniciansbrief.com/journal for an instructive **Client Handout** on safety with dogs

CONTINUES

learn to defend the items they have. There is a mistaken belief that owners must take things away to teach the dog to relinquish items, but this exercise often teaches them only to be more assertively possessive. To take something away, trade for it, which is best accomplished using positive reinforcement training over time.

- **Separate the dog from young children or supervise them closely.**

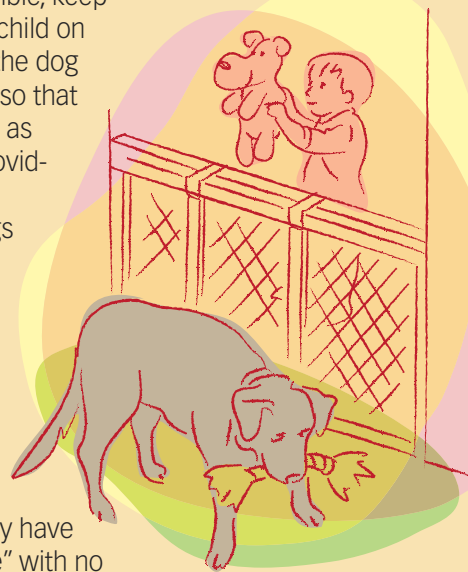
Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers can be intimidating to dogs because of their high-pitched voices, quick movements, and unpredictable behavior. For this reason alone, it is important never to leave dogs unsupervised with children and vice versa. It is not enough for a parent to be nearby because bites can happen very quickly. Clients should not allow any dog, regardless of how historically docile, to be climbed up on, poked, prodded, pulled, or otherwise baby-handled. Instead, watch carefully and be sure the dog and child are secure in each other's presence. If there is any distraction at all, whether the phone or dinner preparation, the dog should be securely separated.

- **It's NOT dominance.**

Probably the greatest misunderstanding between our clients and their pets is the notion that dogs' misbehavior—especially aggression—is rooted in dominance. This misconception has led to harsh corrections and frustrated (and often bitten) owners.³ The approach that corresponds with the alternative view—

Baby gates are wonderful tools

If direct supervision isn't possible, keep the dog on one side with the child on the other—making sure that the dog has some special treat or toy so that it doesn't view the separation as punishment. In addition to providing security, this set up will teach the dog that great things happen when the child is around. In the meantime, as a very important part of the process, parents need to teach their child the gentle and appropriate way to interact with a dog. If possible, have the parent get a stuffed toy that looks like the dog they have so that the child can "practice" with no chance of harm.



that pet dogs bite in fear, self-defense, or defense of resources—results in greater long-term success because the dog is less frustrated or frightened and, most important, interactions do not end in injury.

PRESERVING THE BOND

No matter how deeply a dog is loved, the relationship with its human family will be jeopardized if the dog bites someone. Aggressive behavior cannot be "cured," but it can sometimes be prevented or

certainly minimized by following the above-mentioned principles. Prevention is possible when the triggers of aggression are discussed with clients, whether through a written handout, an exam room conversation, or an evening seminar at the veterinary clinic (perhaps with no dogs). Dogs, like many people, feel safest when interactions are predictable and gentle. Ultimately both dogs and their people will feel a sense of mutual safety when this precept is followed, and your clients will keep their dogs for life.

Clients should not allow any dog, regardless of how historically docile, to be climbed up on, poked, prodded, pulled, or otherwise baby-handled.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.