

Aggression Warnings

As a dog owner, you are responsible to your dog, to your family, and to the general public. Your responsibilities include making sure your pet is vaccinated, supervised when outside, and friendly towards people, including children, the mailman, and even the animal control officer! Some of the most important things you as a dog owner can do to prevent dog bites are:

- **Spay or Neuter your dog!**
- **Socialize, socialize, and socialize!**
- **Training, training, training!**
- **Supervise your dog at all times!**
- **Always err on the safe side!**

Dogs are incredibly social creatures; they love people, unless they are taught not too. Dogs that are confined to the house, or worse yet, tied up in the backyard, are the dogs most likely to bite. By taking your dog to a group obedience class, you are meeting two of the points made above. Training your pet how to act appropriately around people and other animals is very important. By joining a group obedience class, they are socializing with new people and other dogs, and learning all at the same time! Dogs that are afraid of new situations can end up biting a person out of fear. Start the dog as young as possible. Most trainers offer some type of puppy kindergarten, or even a playgroup. Just letting your dog play with other dogs while the owners are present is a great start to properly socializing your dog. If your dog is comfortable, take him to parks, beaches, even playgrounds, and let people pet him. But remember; always err on the safe side! If your dog starts to appear uncomfortable with the attention, remove him from the situation. It is perfectly acceptable to tell a person they can't pet your dog right now, that he's a bit overwhelmed. If the dog becomes frightened, it can take a long time to get him comfortable with strangers again, since the frightening experience will be what he remembers.

It is important that you are always near your dog whenever new situations are introduced. Your dog looks to you for leadership, and will often base his reactions on yours. If you are walking your dog on-leash, and you meet another dog being walked, how you respond to the situation tells your dog whether or not it is safe. If you tense up, he will feel that through an increase in pressure on his lead, which may trigger his defenses. Your stress tells him that you are frightened, and if you're scared, he will be too!

While no dog owner ever wants to believe their dog is capable of biting, statistics show differently. Every year, over 4 million people are bitten by an animal, 800,000 of them seriously enough to require medical care. Every year, dogs kill 10-12 people. Most of these are children, usually boys between 5 and 9 years old. Almost 80 percent of the dogs that bite are male. They usually bite at home, and it's usually the face or hands that are bitten. No one wants to think of his or her child, or grandchild becoming permanently disfigured by a dog, but it happens all too often. There are several warning signs that your dog could become aggressive.

- **Growling for any reason other than play**
- **Curling or lifting of the lips**
- **Mounting or "humping" of children OR adults**

- **Any sign that the dog is resource guarding; tenses, growls, snaps, shows teeth, or tries to stare you down when you approach his food or toys**
- **Refusing to move off furniture, or out of your way when you're walking**
- **Any attempt to bite, even if it doesn't break the skin**
- **Barking in an aggressive manner, with the ears back, tail held low, head held down**

If your dog shows any of these signs, it is time to seek help from an expert. It is also important to have your dog thoroughly checked by the veterinarian. Sometimes, illness can cause a dog to react in an aggressive manner, especially if the illness is causing pain. A dog that is hurt or sick may respond aggressively in an attempt to avoid pain. That is why it is extremely important not to discipline a dog exhibiting aggressive behaviors by striking the dog. A dog that may have only been giving a warning of aggression may in fact bite someone who has just hurt them.

It is important to remember that any dog is capable of biting. All dogs have 42 teeth in their mouth, whether it is a Greyhound, a Bullmastiff, a Chihuahua, or a Pug. All dogs come equipped with two sets of canine teeth, designed for ripping and tearing their food. Those are the teeth that generally cause most of the damage. They may look smaller in certain breeds, but in proportion to their body size, that cute little Chihuahua has teeth the same size as the Irish wolfhound. Be it the world's largest dog, or the world's smallest, those teeth all have the ability to puncture skin.

While many dogs will go through their whole life and never bite a single person, some dogs will not only bite, but also bite and cause severe damage, possibly death. Many people with little dogs think their pet is exempt from biting, but little dogs are notoriously intolerant of children, or rough handling in any form. Many veterinarians and their staff are bitten every year, and often by a little dog. Part of the problem is that little dogs are not usually treated as dogs, but as children. If your dog is thought of as a child, then often the subtle dog body language signs of aggression are overlooked, or worse, thought of as being cute. If the owner fails to see the dog as a dog, they often overlook or deny problem behavior. They may come to ultimately regret that, as well.

Ask yourself the questions listed below. Answer honestly, no making excuses. If you answer yes to several of these questions, you may have an aggressive dog on your hands. Seek help from a professional before your dog becomes another statistic!

- **If the doorbell rings, do you automatically confine your dog, or grab his collar to have a conversation with the person at the door?**
- **Do you avoid doing things to your dog, such as brushing or nail trimming, because doing these things makes her growl or snap?**
- **Are you able to remove toys and treats from your dog's mouth? Can you touch his food dish while he's eating? Can your children?**
- **Does your veterinarian always use a muzzle or other form of restraint when examining your dog?**
- **Has your dog ever bitten, even once? Have you made excuses for her behavior, such as "it was an accident" or "she was frightened" or some other rationalization?**

Seek help and seek it now. Contact your veterinarian for a referral to a behaviorist who specializes in aggressive dogs. You should never try to cure an aggression problem yourself, since you are probably the one who taught the dog those behaviors in the first place. Understand that aggressive behavior does not go away on

it's own. The dog doesn't just decide that today they are going to start liking everyone. Aggression is a very real issue, and needs to be dealt with by a professional. If the aggression cannot be dealt with appropriately, euthanasia may be necessary. While it is hard emotionally on the family, placing the dog into another home may not be an option. There have been cases where aggressive dogs were given away, only to bite in the new home. When the victim sued the previous owners, the courts found the owners guilty of negligence. They knew the dog had aggressive tendencies, and ignored it. In some states, this could also be considered child endangerment. While no one wants to see the family dog euthanized, sometimes it is the best thing for everyone, including the dog. Hopefully, your dog will never exhibit a single aggressive behavior, and will live out his life in bliss and happiness. But should even one warning sign show itself, seek help from a professional. For the safety of everyone.

Respectfully submitted by Tonya Rivers, ACO New London Police Department