

Teaching Your Child to Avoid Dog Bites

Children seem to love dogs with a passion. They just need to learn to love dogs with some caution.

This lesson is critically important for kids. Each year, about 4.7 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs—80% of them by canines we know and interact with regularly—and it's estimated that more than half of those victims are under the age of 13. What's more, children are at least three times more likely than adults to sustain a serious dog-bite.

11 Simple Steps for Relating to Dogs

Even the friendliest dogs can be uncomfortable with a child's quick movements and loud tone of voice. Children tend to get excited around dogs, approaching quickly, talking loudly, sometimes even hugging. Any one of these actions can easily result in a bite. So what's a child to do? In a nutshell: Speak quietly and move slowly around dogs, and follow these simple rules:

- Before petting someone's dog, ask the person's permission. If it's okay, approach slowly and quietly. Let the dog sniff you first, then pet the dog's sides or back gently.
- Never sneak up on or pet a dog who is eating or sleeping. Animals may bite when they're startled or frightened.
- Never pet a dog who is playing with a toy. Dogs are often protective of toys, and may think a child is trying to take it.
- Never try to pet a dog who is in a car. Dogs will often protect that space.
- Never pet a dog who is behind a fence. Most dogs naturally protect their property and home.

Learning to understand dogs' body language is another important way to avoid being bitten. Teach children that animals use body language to tell us how they feel. When a dog is angry or fearful, she is likely to bite, and should never be approached. Here are the signs to look for:

- An angry dog may try to make herself look big: ears standing up, the fur on her back standing on end, and tail straight up (it may be wagging). She may bare her teeth and growl, and stare straight at whoever is approaching.
- A frightened dog behaves differently, and may shrink to the ground, put his tail between his legs, and fold his ears back.

Although children will most often interact with their family's and neighbors' dogs, they need to know what to do should they encounter an unknown dog, off-leash and without a caregiver. Teach children to avoid such dogs, not make direct eye contact with them, and slowly and quietly walk away. If a strange dog approaches, children should follow these tips:

- If you are walking, stop and stand still (like a tree) with your hands at your side.
- If you are playing on the ground, lie still on the ground (like a log) with your knees tucked into your stomach and your hands over your ears. When you stay still and quiet like this, the dog will most likely just sniff you and go away.
- Never, ever try to outrun a dog. Back away slowly from him instead.



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