

Kids, Dogs, and Dog Bites

Many parents are concerned that off-leash dogs pose a significant threat to children. Nothing is more frightening to a parent than to think of their child being injured by a strange dog. It is equally distressing to a dog owner to think of their beloved pet hurting a child, even accidentally. The good news is that, with proper supervision, negative interactions between children and dogs can be prevented, allowing children to experience the warm and loving bond with a devoted pet. What follows are some statistics on pet-related injuries and some suggestions for preventing them.

Dog Bite Statistics

This data shows that the percentage of dog bites to the total dog population is remarkably low. It also shows the vast majority of dog bites do not involve a strange or unfamiliar animal, but the family's own pet or one belonging to a neighbor. The statistics also indicate that in at least half of the cases, biting probably resulted from unsupervised or inappropriate behavior toward the pet.

According to a recent study, available at the Louisiana State University Medical Center, there were approximately 100 million dogs and cats in the U.S. in 1995.

- Between 1 and 2 million dog bites are reported each year.
- About 33 percent of all animal bites involve a child.
- 85 percent of all dog bites (80 percent of cat bites) are inflicted by animals belonging to the victim's family or to a neighbor.
- Roughly 50 percent of the bites were considered to have been provoked. Facial injuries are more common in children than in adults.
- Animal bites accounted for 1 percent of emergency room visits in 1992.

What Dog Guardians/Owners and Parents Can Do

Animal behaviorists have developed theories to explain pack animal behavior that can help you safely supervise your dog around children. Behaviorists theorize that dogs view their human family to be their pack. Pack dynamics can be explained, in simplest terms, as a process of determining what is considered a fluid pecking order. Without proper supervision, dogs may incorrectly assume a child to be lower in the pack hierarchy in certain situations.

Due to the varying levels of intellectual and emotional development in each individual child, it is critical that parents help supervise the child-dog interactions and teach their children to respect dogs. Here are some suggestions for both dog guardians/owners and parents to consider:

- Always supervise a young child's interaction with a dog. Show them how to gently touch and pet a dog and let them learn by example. Be alert so you can prevent your child from being inadvertently knocked over by the dog.
- Do not force a child to approach a pet if the child is frightened. Let them see how you interact with the pet and give them time to gain confidence first.
- Teach children to never approach a strange dog without asking the handler first. If the handler is not present, leave the dog alone.
- Teach your child never to startle or suddenly approach a dog, even your own family dog. Explain that dogs may bite to protect themselves if they feel frightened or injured, if they're startled by a loud noise, or if they're hit or handled roughly.
- Avoid situations where a child has food, toys, or stick-like objects around a dog, which may lead to predictable behavior by the dog (food stealing, jumping-up, excitable or rough play).

- Avoid letting a child stare face to face with any dog, because the dog may interpret prolonged eye contact as a threatening display. Teach your child canine calming signals instead.
- Stress that animals are not people and that they respond to behavior more so than to language. Children are frequently subjected to unrealistic views of animals in TV commercials and cartoons, where dogs that talk, walk on two legs, and even use their front paws like human hands. Introduce children to pets in a calm and quiet environment. Avoid taking very small children into an area crowded with dogs, such as a local dog park.
- As a child gets older, encourage them to take their dog to an obedience class where they can learn how to properly handle their dog. This can be a rich and rewarding experience for both child and dog.
- Be aware of "leash aggression" – normally friendly dogs can sometimes feel vulnerable and act aggressively while restricted to a leash. If your dog is not known to be child-friendly and child-safe, do not let children approach it.
- Make sure your dogs vaccinations are up to date and that your dog is in good health. Dogs who are in pain or ill can bite unexpectedly. Special care should be taken to protect elderly dogs living with chronic pain (arthritis, for example) from children; the child may accidentally injure the dog. Even normally sweet natured, well-behaved dogs may bite when experiencing sudden or acutely painful events.