

He Just Decided to Bite

I read an article recently about a dog biting a young child in the face. The child was ok and no stitches were needed. Still, it is very distressing to hear of things like this. A child who is bitten might be traumatized for life, the parents and the dog owner may be consumed by regret and riddled with guilt, and the dog may lose its life. It is so important that we, as dog owners, become as knowledgeable as we can about dog safety and dog bite prevention. This includes learning to read a dog's body language so that we know when the dog is uncomfortable and stressed and can take appropriate action before it is too late.

We often hear that the dog bit "without warning" or "just decided to bite." However, unless a dog is ill, in pain, or unstable, he will not bite without warning. When people say that a dog bit "without warning" they usually mean that the dog did not bare its teeth or growl. But these two behaviors are generally the last in a series of stress signals; that is, signals that are designed to let us know the dog is uncomfortable. The earlier signals are things like looking away, whale eye, turning away, walking away, lip licking, scratching, yawning, shaking off. If you see your dog exhibiting any of these behaviors out of context (for example, yawning when not tired or licking her lips when there's no food in sight) take a look at what is going on in the environment to see if something is creating stress. If it is, remove the source of the stress or remove your dog from the situation. Remember to look at the situation from the dog's perspective, not your perspective.

Be aware, not only of your own dog, but of dogs that belong to others as well. Even if someone tells you, your child, or your grandchild that the dog is "friendly," don't approach the dog if you see any of the signals mentioned above or if you feel uncomfortable about the dog for any reason. Trust your instincts and err on the side of caution. Not every dog owner is aware of what their dog's body language is saying.

And never correct/punish a dog for growling. A growl is a very important warning signal! If you correct/punish a dog for growling, you run the risk that if he is extremely scared or stressed, he will skip the warning and go right to a bite. This does not mean that you should ignore the growl. Rather, you should determine what caused the dog to growl and work on the underlying issue that caused the growl. You may need to seek the help of a professional.

There are a number of great sources for information about learning to read your dog's body language and learning to be safe around dogs. Some of these are:

- The website www.doggonesafe.com The main focus of this site is child safety around dogs and dog bite prevention
- "On Talking Terms with Dogs," by Turid Rugaas. There is both a book and a 48 minute DVD. Although the DVD is a bit dated, it is still very informative. They are both available for purchase at www.dogwise.com
- The Association of Professional Dog Trainers' website: www.apdt.com When you reach the site click "Pet Owners," then "Training and Behavior Tips," then "Dog Bite Prevention"

REMEMBER, the more knowledgeable you are, the safer everyone is.