

# Dog Bite Prevention

The following statistics are from a survey conducted in 1994 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- Nearly 2% of the U.S. population—about 4.7 million people—are bitten by a dog each year.
- The vast majority of these bites, about 83%, don't result in injury, and no medical treatment is sought.
- About 800,000 individuals, half of them children, seek medical treatment for dog bites.
- The rate of dog bite injuries is highest among children ages 5-9 years.
- Between 15 and 20 of these annual bites nationwide are fatal.

The importance of these numbers should not be minimized. However, the relative risk dogs pose to people compared to other causes of accidents and fatalities should be kept in mind. The risk of fatal injury directly due to a dog bite is miniscule compared to human fatalities caused by other accidents, such as those caused by cars, falls, choking, fires, drowning, guns and bicycles. Among children, 10 fatalities occur annually from dog bites, compared to 826 from injuries inflicted by parents and other caregivers.



## Increasing Safety, Reducing Risks

To reduce the number of injuries from dog bites, adults and children should be educated about bite prevention, and dog owners should practice responsible dog ownership.

### Recommendations for Parents

1. Be aware of the fact that *any* dog can bite - from the smallest to the largest, even the most friendly, cute and easygoing dogs might bite if provoked.
2. The vast majority of dog bites are from a dog known to the child—his or her own pet, a neighbor's or a friend's.
3. You can help protect your child from dog bites by discussing with him/her the appropriate way to behave around dogs.

### Basic Safety Tips for Children

- Children should not approach, touch or play with any dog that's sleeping, eating, chewing on a toy or bone, or caring for puppies. Animals are more likely to bite if they're startled, frightened or caring for young.
  - Children should never approach a barking, growling or scared dog.
  - Children should not pet unfamiliar dogs without asking permission from the dog's guardian first. If the guardian says it's okay, the child should first let the dog sniff his closed hand. Then taking care to avoid petting the dog on the top of the head, he can pet the dog's shoulders or chest.
  - Children should not try to pet dogs that are behind a fence or in a car. Dogs often protect their home or space.
  - If a child sees a dog off-leash outside, he/she should not approach the dog and should tell an adult immediately.
  - If a loose dog comes near a child, s/he should not run or scream. Instead, s/he should avoid eye contact with the dog and stand very still, like a tree, until the animal moves away. Once the dog loses interest, the child can slowly back away until it's out of sight.

- If a child falls down or is knocked to the ground by a dog, s/he should curl up in a ball with his/her knees tucked into his/her stomach and his/her fingers interlocked behind his/her neck to protect his/her neck and ears. If a child stays still and quiet like this, the dog will most likely just sniff him/her and then go away.
- Children should never try to outrun a dog. If a dog does attack a child, the child should “feed” the dog his/her jacket, bag, bicycle—or anything that s/he has for the dog to grab onto or anything s/he can put between himself/herself and the dog.

## Teaching Your Children:

The following activity will help you and your child understand the difference between safe and potentially dangerous interactions with dogs. Recite aloud with your child the following list of pledges:

1. I will not stare into a dog's eyes.
2. I will not tease, try to go near or pet dogs behind fences, dogs in cars, or dogs chained or tied up in yards.
3. I will not touch a dog I see loose (off-leash) outside.
4. If I see a loose dog, I will tell an adult immediately.
5. I will not run and scream if a loose dog comes near me.
6. I will stand still like a tree and be very quiet if a dog comes near me.
7. I will not touch or play with a dog while it's eating or sleeping.
8. I will only pet a dog if I have permission from the dog's owner.
9. Then I will introduce myself to the dog by letting it sniff my closed hand.

## Understanding Dog Body Language

Understanding dog body language is another key way to help you and your children avoid being bitten. Teach your children that they can read dogs' body language to better understand what dogs are feeling and avoid those whose body language indicates that they're feeling anxious, afraid, threatened, or aggressive.

- An aggressive dog may try to make itself look bigger. Its ears may be up and forward, the fur on its back and tail may stand on end or puff out, and its tail may be straight up—it may even wag. It may have a stiff, straight-legged stance and be moving toward or staring directly at what it thinks is an approaching threat. It may also bare its teeth, growl, lunge and bark. Continued approach toward a dog showing this body language could result in a bite!
- An anxious or scared dog may try to make itself look smaller. It may shrink to the ground in a crouch, lower its head, repeatedly lick its lips, put its tail between its legs, flatten its ears back and yawn. It may look away to avoid direct eye contact. It may stay very still or roll on her back and expose its stomach. Alternatively, it may try to turn away or slowly move away from what it thinks is an approaching threat. If it can't retreat, it may feel it has no other alternative but to defensively growl, snarl, or even bite.
- Many dogs can show a mixture of these body postures, indicating that they feel conflicted. The main idea for children to remember is to avoid any dog showing any of signs of fear, aggression or anxiety—no matter what else the dog is doing. It's important for children to realize that a wagging tail or a crouching body doesn't always mean friendliness.

The main lesson for children practicing safety around dogs is to not chase or tease dogs they know and to avoid dogs they don't know.