

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Dog Safety for Kids

The First Step in Bite Prevention

Teaching children the dos and don'ts regarding animals is among one of the most important lessons you will ever teach. Animals are everywhere and though many are domesticated, this does not automatically make them safe. In fact, each year an estimated 4.7 million people are victims of a dog bite and more than half are children younger than 14 years old, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. When kids are bitten, the injuries tend to be more serious because kids are smaller and are often bitten around the head and neck. How can you make sure you keep your kids safe around dogs?

Today many parents are raising children along with the family dog. Naturally, kids delight in hugging, petting, and playing with their pets; unfortunately, many children grow up believing that all dogs are gentle and friendly like their pets, and commonly fall victim to a dog attack simply because they had never been taught when it is not okay to approach a strange dog.

Start teaching your children the following safety guidelines regarding dogs when they are quite young, and continue reinforcing these precautions frequently. It is the best way to avoid dog bites. Below are the basic rules of dog bite prevention to teach your grade-schooler.

The Golden Rules in Dog Safety

Be Gentle

Please teach your children to be gentle with all animals. This is so important because many parents tune out the noise and do not notice if their children are being rough. A gentle hand will carry them through so many different situations in life, not just meeting animals. When your child approaches a dog, show them how to pet "gently". Do not let them pull on ears or fur, but a gentle rubbing of the fur, or feeling of the ears is okay. Do not let them squeeze handfuls of fur, and make sure they know that a tail is not to be pulled. Do not pat the dog on the head, dogs really do not like it and it can scare them. If your child has a normally heavy hand, do not use a real dog for the first time; instead, use a stuffed animal to demonstrate proper behavior. A dog may not be as patient with grabbing hands, as you would think.

The Right Approach

This is very important! From the time they first understand, you must teach your children how to approach a dog properly! What is the right way to approach a dog? Approach his owner first and ask permission!

To say "Hello" after permission is given approach slowly, NEVER run up to a dog! Hold your hand out (do not push it in the dog's face), palm down, and let the dog sniff you, and then let him decide how close he wants to get. Many dogs love attention, especially Golden Retrievers, but the first few moments of every new meeting is critical. A correct approach will likely have the new dog sidling in closer for hugs and kisses. If the child approaches too quickly, he may frighten the dog, which can make the dog unpredictable. Fear in a dog can look like aggression and can be dangerous. Teach your child to respect dogs and not to be afraid; a child who was taught fear will react to a strange dog in a way that may make the situation even worse. Respect the dog's boundaries, and do not run away from them.

Never Run Away From a Dog

Running will only trigger a "prey" response, and a dog that may have been content to sit and watch will suddenly chase. Even a dog whose only intent is to "play" may cause devastating results when the "prey" is caught.

Never Approach a Dog When He is Eating or Sleeping

Every child needs to know this, whether you have pets in the home or not: Let sleeping dogs lie, an old phrase, but still very true. If a dog is startled from sleep, he can be dangerous. Fear in a dog can be just as dangerous as aggression and sometimes the body language is the same.

If you are a dog owner, and have a dog with food guarding issues, take the time to train him and find a dog trainer to help you correct this behavior.

Never bother a dog that is eating, sleeping or caring for puppies. (This goes for the family pet and other familiar dogs). Do not run past a dog (dogs instinctively chase things, so this may cause a dog to see your child as a target.)

Meeting a Strange Dog with No Owners Present

It is very important to keep a cool head during these moments. Your instincts may tell you to "scream and run", please do not do this! A dog will be interested and take chase. Instead, using a loud, firm voice, tell the dog to "go home". If he does not leave, stand still and do not panic (be a tree). Watch the dog's body language, and determine if he just watching you, curiosity in his posture (ears perked, tail wagging, relaxed stance)? If this is how he looks, just walk away calmly. Again, do not run.

Is he standing in a threatening manner? Ears laid back along his head, his body tense and projecting forward his tail up (may or may not be wagging slowly, do not be fooled dogs with wagging tails can attack), this is a threatening posture. Tell him to "Go lay down" in a firm voice, do not yell, and do not scream. Any sudden move on your part may trigger an attack. Do not make any sudden moves. If he starts to advance, and lunges, stand still and yell for help. Parents, if you come across your child in this position, stay calm and do whatever you have to do to get the dog away. If the owner is nearby, call them over!

If a dog displays threatening behavior such as growling and barking, stay calm, do not look the animal directly in the eyes, and do not run. Stand still or back away slowly.

If you or your child are knocked down by a loose dog, curl up into a fetal position with your arms over your head to protect your face.

Precautions to Take with Your Family Dog

Not all dog bite incidents involve unfamiliar dogs, in fact, many reported a family pet caused a dog bite injury.

Here are some tips to keep in mind to prevent dog bites at home:

Take your dog to obedience training and teach him to obey basic commands such as "sit," "stay," "no" and "come."

When they are old enough to understand, kids should be involved in the training process.

Watch for signs that your pet is feeling stressed, such as tucking its tail low, turning its head away or becoming aggressive (growling, baring its teeth, lifting its tail and ears).

Accidents happen in the blink of an eye, and even the gentlest family dog will bite if he is in pain, or if he has just "had enough".

Teach your child not to wrestle or play aggressive games with your dog

Neuter your dog. Studies have shown that dogs that are neutered are much less likely to bite.

Make sure your dog is vaccinated against rabies and other diseases. An annual checkup is also part of your responsibility to keep the dog and your children safe. Your pet's health and well-being can affect his behavior.

Tell your child to let you know right away about any nips or bites, no matter how small or accidental.

Children should never hug a dog that is not their own, and should only hug their own dog very gently if the dog can tolerate the hug.

Some dogs have a fear of small children, especially if they have not had many pleasant interactions with kids. Most dogs are wary of staring, of quick movements, and of high-pitched screams, all of which are typical of small children. Some dogs are naturally friendlier, more tolerant and more adaptable than other dogs.

Very few bites happen without provocation, but the provocation may exist only in the dog's mind and he may not give a clear warning. We need to realize that dogs are not little people in furry costumes. They do not think in the same way that we do.

Here is one of the most commonly reported scenarios in a bite case:

A very young child sees a pretty dog he would like to pet, but the dog may not want to be petted or could be afraid of children in general. As the child tries to pet the dog, his first instinct may be to show his displeasure by giving a warning, such as a growl. The growl means that something more unpleasant will follow if the warning is not taken seriously.

Depending on the dog, the type and number of warnings can vary. Many dogs faced with a child like this would just walk away. If the child keeps trying to pet the dog, a sterner warning, usually a growl, will follow. Some warnings are more subtle, such as a stiffening of the body. Few dogs bite without giving some indication beforehand, the trick is to be able to read the signs.

Small children (and some adults) do not recognize a warning when they see or hear one. A very young child (under age six) does not know what a growl means. The child does not understand what may be obvious to an adult. The child continues to pet or follow the dog even though the dog has now clearly told him what will happen if he does not stop.

A small child that is petting or hugging a dog has already intruded well within the dog's safety zone. If the dog has tried to leave or has issued a warning with no response from the child, the dog, has no other recourse, he will bite! This is normal, instinctive behavior to the dog. He is responding to what he perceives as a threat and is acting on his instincts. Remember that dogs do not think in the same way that people do, they are animals. A child's innocent action, petting the dog, can be provocation for a bite when seen through the eyes of the dog.

Other circumstances can provoke a dog to bite a child, such as running, playing, and screaming. Children can unknowingly trigger an instinctive predator-prey reaction in some dogs. Children who roughhouse and wrestle with dog are encourage them to use their teeth. Dogs equate this kind of play with littermates or other dogs where using teeth is allowed and acceptable. Startling a sleeping dog or petting him when he is eating can also provoke a bite.

What Your Dog Needs From You

The dog should have a place he can call his own, a crate, a private room, a den. The children should never be allowed to bother the dog when he is in his place.

Teach children to pat the dog gently, no squeezing around the neck, and to leave him alone while he is eating.

Teach children not to run past the dog and scream, for this can excite the dog and lead to aggressive behavior.

Take extra safety precautions when other children visit. If the dog is new to your home, crate the dog or put him in another room.

Children need to learn what kinds of games are appropriate to play with dogs, how to touch the dog properly, how to interpret the dog's body language and when the dog is not to be disturbed.

Children should never hit dogs with their hands or an object, should lower their voices when playing with the dog, leave the dog alone when he is sleeping, eating, or ill, and never tease a dog in any fashion. Many dog bites occur because the child teases the pet beyond endurance.

Do not throw things at the dog to chase the dog away. No matter how it begins, the result is usually the same, the dog learns to fear or hate kids. This hatred may manifest as fear or as aggression, and may end when a child is bitten and the dog is taken to the pound to be placed in a new home, or euthanized.

Never tie a dog in the yard. Children tend to tease tethered dogs even without realizing it, which can lead to aggressive behavior. Many instances of dogs attacking children occur when the dog is tethered in the yard and a screaming or running child enters its space. The tethering causes the dog to feel at a disadvantage, and if he feels threatened he may bite, or over the long-term become aggressive.

Adult supervision is essential! Small children should not be left alone with any dog, no matter how reliable the dog has been before.

Some dogs have a fear of small children, especially if they have not had many pleasant interactions with kids. Most dogs are wary of staring, quick movements, and high-pitched screams, all of which are typical of small children. Some dogs are naturally friendlier, more tolerant and more adaptable than other dogs.

All in all

Again, very few bites happen without provocation, but the provocation may exist only in the dog's mind! We need to realize that dogs are not little people in furry costumes. They do not think in the same way that we do. If they feel they are in danger, afraid or irritated, they will react.

Kids and dogs are wonderful together when adults use common sense, watch their children closely, and put safety first. If a dog bites your child, seek medical treatment right away. If your family pet inflicted the dog bite, talk to your vet about how to prevent future occurrences. If it was an unfamiliar dog, get as much information as you can about the dog (especially its vaccination and medical records) and relay that information to your pediatrician.

Sources:

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KIDS AND DOGS - SAFETY FIRST by Pat Scott
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Kids and Dog Safety Tip Sheet

If you encounter a loose dog

Do not approach an unfamiliar dog, do not run away from a dog and scream, instead remain calm and cross the street to the other side.

If a dog is chasing you, stop running, as this encourages him to chase you. Be a tree!

Roll into a ball and lie still if you are knocked over by a dog

Avoid eye contact with an aggressive dog, and back off slowly and non-threateningly; staring at a dog in the eyes is an act of aggression on your part and can cause the dog to attack to protect himself.

Do not touch, or attempt to touch, the animal's eyes.

Immediately report stray dogs to an adult, and report any dogs that are acting strangely; such as, a dog that is growling, showing his teeth, foaming at the mouth, or barking hysterically.

How to approach a dog

If the dog is on a leash, ask the dog's owner permission to pet the dog first

Keep your face away from the dog when approaching or playing with them

Only play with dogs when supervised by an adult

Always allow a dog to sniff and see you before trying to pet a dog

Do not make loud noises or sudden moves when approaching a dog; speak softly to him

Do not disturb a dog that is eating, sleeping, or taking care of her puppies

Always hold your hand out first and allow the dog to sniff your hand. Never grab at a dog.

Do not approach a dog that is watching and protecting his property

Never attempt to touch a neighbor's dog through a fence

Never hurt the animal by pulling its tail or fur, for example

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Understanding Dog Communication

How to Read Your Dog's Body Language

Knowing how to read your dog's body language is the key to understanding your dog, assessing her attitude, and predicting her next move. Because dogs are non-verbal their body language does the talking for them. Vocalization actually takes second place to a dog's body language. Once you learn the basic types of dog body language, spend some time observing dogs interacting with people and other animals in various situations. Understanding a dog's body language can also help protect you and your dog from dangerous situations as well as aid in training or identification of common behavior problems.

Confident

The confident dog stands straight and tall with her head held high, ears perked up, and eyes bright. Her mouth may be slightly open but is relaxed. Her tail may sway gently, curl loosely or hang in a relaxed position. She is friendly, non-threatening and at ease with her surroundings.

Happy

A happy dog will show the same signs as a confident dog. In addition, she will usually wag her tail and sometimes hold her mouth open more or even pant mildly. She appears even more friendly and content than the confident dog, with no signs of anxiety.

Playful

A playful dog is happy and excited. Her ears are up, eyes are bright, and tail wags rapidly from side to side. She may jump and run around with glee. Often, a playful dog will exhibit the play bow: front legs stretched forward, head straight ahead, rear end up in the air and possibly wiggling. She may also put her paw on another dog's back, and these are most certainly an invitation to play!

Submissive

A submissive dog holds her head down, ears down flat and averts her eyes. Her tail is low and may sway slightly, but is not tucked. She may roll on her back and expose her belly. A submissive dog may also nuzzle or lick the other dog or person to further display passive intent. Sometimes, she will sniff the ground or otherwise divert her attention to show that she does not want to cause any trouble. A submissive dog is meek, gentle and non-threatening.

Anxious

The anxious dog may act somewhat submissive, but often holds her ears partially back and her neck stretched out. She stands in a very tense posture and sometimes shudders. Often, an anxious dog whimpers, moans, yawns and/or licks her lips. Her tail is low and may be tucked. She may show the whites of her eyes, something called whale eye. An anxious dog may overreact to any stimulus and can become fearful or even aggressive. If

you are familiar with the dog, you may try to divert her attention to something more pleasant; however, be cautious and do not provoke her or try to soothe her.

Fearful

The fearful dog combines submissive and anxious attitudes with more extreme signals. She stands tense, but is very low to the ground. Her ears are flat back and her eyes are narrowed and averted. Her tail is between her legs and she typically trembles. A fearful dog often whines or growls and might even bare her teeth in defense. She may also urinate or defecate when approached. A fearful dog can turn aggressive quickly if she senses a threat. Do not try to reassure the anxious dog, but remove yourself from the situation calmly. If you are the owner, be confident and strong, but do not comfort or punish your dog.

Try to move her to a less threatening, more familiar location. If you have to coax her, make sure you always talk in a soft, upbeat and happy voice. A fearful dog needs to know all is okay and you are not a threat. If you try to console, she may think you are scared too, which can make the situation worse.

Dominant

A dominant dog will try to assert herself over other dogs and sometimes people. She stands tall and confident and may lean a bit forward. Her eyes are wide and she makes direct eye contact with the other dog or person. Her ears are up and alert and the hair on her back may stand on edge. She may growl lowly. Her demeanor appears less friendly and possibly threatening. If the behavior is directed at dog that submits, there is little concern. If the other dog also tries to be dominant, a fight may break out. A dog that directs dominant behavior towards people can pose a serious threat. Do not make eye contact and slowly try to leave. If your dog exhibits this behavior towards people, behavior modification is necessary.

Aggressive

An aggressive dog goes far beyond dominant. Her feet are firmly planted on the ground in a territorial manner, and she may lunge forward. Her ears are pinned back, head is straight ahead, and eyes are narrowed but piercing. Her tail is straight, held up high, and may even be wagging! Do not be fooled! A dog that wags its tail can also bite! She may also bare her teeth, snap her jaw and growl or bark threateningly. The hairs along her back stand on edge.

If you are near a dog showing these signs it is very important to get away carefully. Stay calm, do not run and do not make eye contact with the dog. Slowly back away to safety. If your own dog becomes aggressive, seek the assistance of a professional dog trainer to learn the proper way to correct the behavior. Almost any dog will bite under the right circumstances.

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