

Behavior Solutions: Bite Prevention

The old adage, “His bark is worse than his bite,” is often repeated, though not necessarily true. It’s a fact some dog lovers take for granted that dogs can, and sometimes do, bite—averaging 4.7 million cases annually. From Pomeranians to Doberman pinschers most any dog can bite when provoked, and looking at the breed alone will not tell you which dog will lick your hand or bite it. Knowing how to properly approach a dog and assess his body language can help you avoid an unpleasant greeting.

Why Dogs Bite

In many instances biting is a last resort defense mechanism when all other signals to make the offender leave have been ignored. Very fearful dogs that are cornered (as in a kennel or similar confinement) and being encroached upon will give signs to try and let you know that they are uncomfortable with your presence. Continuing to approach the dog increases his anxiety and takes away his option to get away from you, leaving him to fight his way out of the stressful situation. Some dogs bite out of dominance. If your dog is displaying any aggressive behaviors, consult with a professional training and behavior specialist.

A dog may bite to protect a “scarce” resource, such as food, treats, toys, etc. Caution should be used in attempting to take any object away from an unfamiliar dog and even the family pet. Your body language and how you approach a dog can also be misinterpreted. Keep in mind that a friendly greeting to a person can appear threatening and domineering to a dog. Take the short quiz below to see how much you know, then continue reading to learn the warning signs, as well as the proper way to approach a dog.

What Do You Know?

Do you know enough to keep from being bitten by a strange dog? Take the short true/false quiz below to find out, then check your answers at the end.

- 1) The best way to greet a dog is to lean over him slightly with your hand extended for him to smell.
- 2) A wagging tail means the dog is friendly.
- 3) Fearful or shy dogs are not a threat.
- 4) You should never look an aggressive dog in the eyes.
- 5) Chaining a dog can make him more dangerous.

Answers: 1) F; 2) F; 3) F; 4) T; 5) T

How did you do? If some of the answers surprise you, read on. The training and behavior specialists at Starmark Animal Behavior Center work with dogs of all temperaments every day and can help you stay safe around most any dog.

Body Language of the Bite

Dogs communicate with each other through body postures. Since they do not have the ability to verbally tell us when they are scared or threatened or stressed, we must rely on their physical clues to determine their state of mind. A dog gives warning signals before any biting attempt occurs, but they are often misunderstood, misread, or ignored by us. Whatever the cause, clues that biting is probable can be seen in the face, ears, tail, hair, and overall body posture, though they are shown in slightly different manners.

A fearful or shy dog would much prefer to be left alone than bite. This dog will give several physical cues to make you, or the source of his anxiety, go away, including:

standing with his body leaned away from you; lowered head; tail tucked tight under his body; ears down; hackles up; whites of eyes showing; mouth somewhat down drawn; bared teeth; urinating. Not all of these cues may be present simultaneously, but any combination of them means the dog is not comfortable with your presence and caution should be exercised in your approach.

Bites can also occur out of aggression. This dog may feel challenged or threatened by your body language, or is protecting his territory, a resource, or in the case of a mother, her young. The purpose of these cues is to tell you that your approach is not welcome and may include: a forward leaning, rigid body stance; focused and alert eyes; high, stiff, possibly wagging tail; forward ears; bared teeth; growling. The situation and the manner in which you approach a dog may be received as a threat, even though your intentions are good.

Dog Friendly Greetings

We may sometimes treat our dogs like children, but the fact is, they are not people and do not communicate in the same way we do. When greeting a person, you will often look them in the eye, lean forward, and extend your hand, or even give them a hug if it's someone familiar. While this is a socially acceptable and polite greeting between people, it could be interpreted as a show of dominance or aggression to a dog, making him uncomfortable. Instead of forward movements, approach the dog with your body turned somewhat to the side. Do not extend your hand out to him or stare him directly in the eyes. Keep your voice calm, but confident. Remember to stay still and composed, and

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do not run away from the dog as this can heighten his excitement and incite him into a chase.

Like people dogs require personal space, and an invasion of that space by a person or animal can put a dog off. Do not force yourself on an unfamiliar dog. Instead, let him come to you on his terms and do not make quick movements toward him. Using food or treats when he approaches can help break first meeting tensions. If at any time the dog shies away or displays any of the signs listed previously, calmly back up and allow him to become comfortable with your presence before trying again. Trust your instincts- if the situation feels uncomfortable to you, do not approach the dog.

Regardless of the breed, dogs have forty-two teeth, which means any is capable of biting. You cannot tell by looking at the size, sex, color, or breed if a dog will bite. Though dogs inherit traits that are particular to their breed, each has his own unique temperament and experiences. Some dogs like being petted, while others do not, and most do not enjoy being petted on top of the head. Some have been taught by their owners to enjoy getting hugs from people, while those who haven't will be highly uncomfortable with it. Like the old saying, you can't judge a book by its cover, you also can't judge a dog by his breed.

When a dog is with his owner, ask the owner for permission *before* petting him and respect their reply. There is probably due reason if they do not allow it, like the dog is uncomfortable with unfamiliar people or surroundings. Use extra caution if the owner has the dog restrained on a tight or short leash. If the owner is not confident of the dog and his reactions, the dog may pick up on the owner's anxiety and become more

protective of people approaching himself or his owner. Keep a safe distance from the dog until he appears to be comfortable.

Kids and Dogs

Children, particularly boys between the ages of five and nine years old, make up close to thirty percent of the 4.7 million dog bite victims annually. Since children are smaller and closer to eye level, bites to the face are most common. It is important to educate children how to approach and handle a dog to keep them safe. Get them in the habit of asking an adult for permission before they pet a strange dog. Make them aware that some dogs may not be friendly, so they need to be extra careful around dogs they don't know. Teasing dogs behind fences, chained in a yard, or left in a car can be especially dangerous, as can rough treatment, so emphasis should be strongly placed against these sorts of behaviors. Never leave a small child alone unattended with any dog, even one that is familiar.

Preventing Your Dog from Biting

As puppies, dogs will often nip or bite during play or for attention. While it may not hurt when he is young, a bite from an adult dog can be dangerous. Teach your puppy not to bite from the beginning by diverting his attention with obedience exercises. If you are playing with your puppy and he bites, redirect him into a sit or down and reward him with a treat and praise when he does what you ask. This will help teach him that these actions are rewarded and biting is not. The Pro Training Clicker™ is a helpful tool in teaching your puppy new exercises. Read the full guide on www.starmarkacademy.com.

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Introduce your puppy in a calm, pleasant way to as many people and places as possible to prevent fears from developing. Adult dogs can also benefit from continued socialization.

Take your dog to pet-friendly locations and allow people, including children, to calmly greet him and give him a treat. Allow people wearing uniforms, hats, or facial hair to greet your dog and give him a treat. For more information on socializing your dog, refer to Starmark Animal Behavior Center “Behavior Solutions: Problem Prevention and/or Socialization” online at www.starmarkacademy.com.

Trainer Developed: Academy Tested

The certified training and behavior specialists at Starmark Animal Behavior Center created this behavior solutions guide with you and your dog’s needs in mind. Products mentioned in this guide are available at PETsMART and other pet supply retailers, as well as online at our web site www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com. All products, guides and videos are tested and approved by the training directors of Starmark Academy, our accredited school for professional dog trainers. It is the hands-on experience of our training division, combined with the vast technical knowledge and experience of the Starmark Academy staff that allows us to bring you useful and unique dog training and behavior solutions. We train dogs just like yours every day; we work with pet enthusiasts just like you every day. Thank you for choosing Starmark, the world leader in pet education.

For additional pet solutions and information about our products, please visit Starmark Animal and Behavior Center online at our Web sites:

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www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com; www.starmarkacademy.com; and
www.schoolfordogtraining.com.

Starmark Trainer Recommended Equipment

Starmark Pro-Training Clicker™—A fun and easy way to teach your dog obedience commands. It's like saying "Well done," on time, every time your dog does something you like.

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