

## THE CANINE BEHAVIOR SERIES

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### Aggression: When Should I Worry?

We often value protection (aggression) against intruders, and expect our dogs to make judgments beyond their experience, training or innate ability. Since a dog who bites humans may go months between bites, people tend to downplay the significance of aggression. The fear of losing your dog can also contribute to denial and failure to deal with the problem.

#### Risk Factors

It's impossible to list every behavior or situation that may be reason for concern, and if something does arise that makes you wonder, be sure to consult your veterinarian. When indicated, your veterinarian can help you find a veterinary behavior specialist for an expert evaluation of the dog and the situation.

This precaution can save lives, and should be taken sooner rather than later whenever there are questions of safety. Do not wait for someone to be bitten. If your dog does any of the following, it's time to look for expert help in person:

1. Growls, barks, snarls, snaps or lunges at people on walks [see [aggression to passersby](#)].
2. Shows aggression toward visitors to your home.
3. Shows aggressive behaviors in your back yard, including aggression toward children or adults on the other side of the fence or the meter reader.
4. Has killed one or more cats.
5. Has been kept on a tie out as a means of confinement, and is showing signs of aggression. (A tie-out is not a safe method for confinement—aggression is a common result.)
6. Aggressively guards food or toys. [see [food guarding](#)].
7. Shows aggression toward people who approach the crate when the dog is in it.
8. Shows aggression toward veterinarian, groomer, or family members when they groom or otherwise handle the dog.
9. Shows any aggressive behavior toward a member of the household.
10. Fighting among household dogs to the point of injuries.

Much of the time you can save your dog by early intervention. Sometimes you'll save a human from a serious injury. Either way, it's essential to act on the warning signals of aggression by getting the right help in a timely manner.

#### Times to be Watchful

Experts are aware of several risk factors for dog aggression that most people don't know to watch for. Knowing when to be careful can prevent a good dog from getting caught in a bad situation.

A female dog with young puppies goes through a hormonal stage of serious protectiveness. One day the family children handle the puppies in the nest, and suddenly the next day the mother dog cannot tolerate this intrusion. Do not allow children free access to a mother with pups.

Male dogs commonly become overprotective of female dogs, especially if the female is in heat or just generally neurotic. You reduce the risk of your male dog biting people by neutering him, preferably by the time he's a year old. Spaying the female reduces the risk of her inflicting injuries on children since heat cycles and puppies in the nest are the times she poses highest risks of biting.

Dogs need human help to learn to inhibit their bite with people. Normal play between two dogs involves mouthing that will injure a person. Dogs have no hands, so it's normal for them to grasp and otherwise act with their teeth. It's up to humans to teach dogs to inhibit the bite with people, and this training needs to start in puppyhood.

When raising a puppy, get expert help with bite inhibition training—puppy classes are essential for all pups. If you're adopting an adult dog, get expert help to evaluate the dog's bite inhibition. Do not adopt a dog who shows a lack of this essential conditioning, especially if your dog will be around children.

A puppy removed from the mother and littermates misses some of the bite inhibition training from other dogs at a critical development stage. This experience is essential for a puppy to grow into a dog who will be safe around humans. Do not adopt a puppy removed from the litter prior to 7 weeks of age (8 weeks or older is preferred, but 7 weeks is the minimum age), especially if your dog will ever be around children.

A dog new to the home can pose special risks. It's impossible to thoroughly evaluate a dog's temperament in one test, or even over a period of a couple of weeks in foster care. The dog's behavior will change with maturity and also will be different with your family than in some other situation. Be observant and careful with any new dog.

Children under 2 months of age are at increased risk when left alone with dogs. No child under school age should ever be left alone with any dog, but dogs show a more dangerous perception of children under the age of 2 months, and some babies have been killed. Babies, preschool children, and senior citizens are the humans at highest risk of death from dog attacks.

Dogs in pain are at increased risk of injuring someone when the person approaches in a way that causes the dog to fear being hurt. Dogs tend to hide signs of pain as a survival instinct (showing weakness in the wild could get an animal killed), so it's essential to be watchful for pain. Protect your dog from being hurt so the dog will not feel the need to self-protect.

Dogs are often labeled "fear biters." This is an unfair label that makes it seem fearfulness automatically makes a dog dangerous. It is true, though, that dogs who bite in fear often bite people who act in ways that can frighten dogs, even if the actions were reasonable from a human point of view. Such dogs can face a terrible price for biting, and bite wounds can be permanently disfiguring or worse. Protecting dogs from situations in which their fear provokes a bite is important. In managing our dogs, we need to avoid handling that frightens them. No one thinks straight when scared, including a dog.

### **When in Doubt...**

Some states now have criminal penalties for people whose dogs kill someone after there were warning signs the people should have heeded. Other results include a lawsuit, having a loved one scarred for life, or losing a child.

Thankfully fatalities from dog attacks are rare, but injuries are common. Everyone with a dog must take seriously the responsibility of protecting people from being hurt by the dog. Whenever there is reason for concern, pick up the phone and make the appointment, starting with your veterinarian and then following through on veterinary advice. It's the best way to protect your dog as well as the people you love.

The book *Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind the Statistics* by Karen Delise is a good starting point for those interested in researching this topic further.

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