

Parent Guide for Child Safety Around Dogs

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This parent guide is intended to introduce the tools children and parents/guardians can use to help reduce the risk of occurrence of a dog bite. Most dog bite victims are children and in most cases the dog that bites is their own, a friend's, neighbor's or babysitter's dog. Some ways to reduce the risk of your child being bitten are as follows:

1. Supervise children at all times when interacting with a dog, even the family dog.
2. Encourage children not to approach any dog that does not belong to them.
3. Teach children not to hug a dog or approach a dog while it is eating or sleeping, *even the family dog*.
4. Teach children to stand still and be a tree if a dog is bothering them or frightening them, or a strange dog approaches.
5. If you have a dog, train it to enjoy the presence of children using positive methods and never allow rough play or chasing games between child and dog.

Recognizing that many children love dogs and want to pet them and that as children grow and become more independent, adult supervision is not always possible, this guide was developed for families to learn about dog communication and bite prevention. It is important to remind the children that dogs are animals and we can never really know for sure what they are thinking, or how they might act. The information learned through this guide is not a substitute for caution, common sense and supervision.

We present three basic types of information, each of which is discussed briefly in this guide. These are:

1. How to decide whether a dog is safe or dangerous to approach by studying his behavior and body language.

2. Things a child should do when interacting with a dog.
3. Things a child should not do when interacting with a dog.

SAFE OR DANGEROUS?

It is possible to guess at how a dog feels and how he might act by studying his body language, or postures. Visit the Doggone Safe website to see photos of dogs showing various different body language signals. The table on the following pages describes the meanings that may be communicated by a dog using key body parts. Some body postures can have more than one meaning. For example, erect ears may mean that the dog is happy, excited, confident, aggressive or interested. Some dogs have naturally erect ears and so other features, such as wrinkled forehead, leaning forward stance and slow wag with tail held flat, or tail held high over the back would indicate arousal in the dog. Any form of aroused dog, whether excited, interested, angry or aggressive can bite, paw or jump and thus be dangerous to a child. For this reason and for the sake of simplicity, all possible interpretations of each body posture are not listed in the table. If a dog is aroused for any reason, he is to be considered dangerous and should not be petted by a child.

Some dogs are difficult to read due to their natural features. For example, some dogs have erect ears, wrinkled forehead and a tail held curved over the back. A child would be unable to determine whether a dog with these features is safe or dangerous. In cases where there is uncertainty the child should be encouraged not to approach. Small fluffy dogs and furry dogs with floppy ears can look very appealing and cuddly. Children should be encouraged to study the dog's body language and not let the cuteness of the dog influence the decision to approach.

All the body parts listed in the table should be considered in deciding if a dog is safe or dangerous. There could be conflicting signals, such as wagging tail as well as ears forward and fur raised along the spine. An adorable little dog with long floppy ears and silky fur could be lying with head on paws, but showing half moon eyes (whites of eyes showing in

the shape of half moons) and looking worried. This dog should not be approached. When there is uncertainty or conflicting signals are presented by the dog, then the child should not approach.

Particular attention should be paid to the type of tail wag. Confident aggressive dogs will wag with a slow deliberate wag with tail held straight and parallel to the ground or with tail held high over the back. This should not be construed as friendly. A nervous dog may wag his tail between his legs, or may just wag the tip of his tail, with the tail held very low. A friendly dog will wag with enthusiasm and the whole dog may wag. An overly friendly dog may be dangerous to a small child since it could jump, paw or nip. Such friendly dogs should only be approached once the dog calms down and the handler clearly has control over the dog.

If a dog is off leash, or there is no adult present then only one rule applies –

Do not approach the dog.

Meanings of Various Dog Body Postures

Body Part	Posture	Possible Meaning	Safe or Dangerous
Ears	Forward	Excited or Alert	Dangerous
	Relaxed	Relaxed	Safe
	Back	Scared	Dangerous
	Can't tell	Unknown	Dangerous
Forehead	Wrinkled	Worried or Alert	Dangerous
Nose	Wrinkled	Aggressive	Dangerous
Head	Drooping	Worried or Unhappy	Dangerous
	High as possible	Aggressive or Alert	Dangerous
	Sideways	Interested	Dangerous
	Resting on paws	Relaxed	Safe
Eyes	Whites showing like half moons	Worried	Dangerous
	Intense stare	Angry or Alert	Dangerous
	Wild look	Excited	Dangerous
	Soft look – eyebrows going up and down	Relaxed	Safe
	Can't tell	Unknown	Dangerous
Whiskers	Quivering	Excited or Worried	Dangerous
Mouth	Lips lifted and pulled back off teeth	Angry	Dangerous
	Jowls puffed out	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Mouth closed	Worried or Alert	Dangerous
	Panting but otherwise looks worried	Worried	Dangerous
	Panting – happy looking	Happy	Safe
Toes	On tippy toe leaning forward over toes	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Curled	Worried	Dangerous

Meanings of Various Dog Body Postures

Body Part	Posture	Possible Meaning	Safe or Dangerous
Tail	Not wagging	Unfriendly/unknown	Dangerous
	Between legs	Scared	Dangerous
	Wagging between legs	Worried	Dangerous
	Tip only wagging	Worried	Dangerous
	Slow wag with tail flat	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Curled high over back – wagging or still	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Slight curl and enthusiastic wag	Friendly	Safe
	Propeller wag	Friendly	Safe
	Whole body frantic wag	Excited	Dangerous
	Can't tell	Unknown	Dangerous
Whole body	Crouched	Scared	Dangerous
	Erect, leaning forward	Aggressive or Alert	Dangerous
	Front legs splayed, head low	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Rolling on back with feet kicking	Excited	Dangerous
	Rolled calmly on back or side	Calm	Safe
	Lying with one paw curled under	Relaxed	Safe
Fur	Fur raised along back	Aggressive or Scared	Dangerous
	Fur fluffed up all over	Aggressive	Dangerous
	Fur on tail fluffed up	Aggressive	Dangerous

Interaction – Do’s

Once a dog has been determined to be a safe dog to pet, and permission to pet the dog has been given by the parent/guardian of the child and the dog handler, then the child can use the following guidelines in interacting with the dog. Adult supervision is required for all dog-child interactions. These interactions are divided into two categories:

1. Greeting a dog that is walking on leash with its handler.
2. Interacting with the family dog or a friend’s dog in the house or fenced yard.

Greeting a Dog

Do Approach calmly and ask handler to ask the dog to sit – rapid movement towards dog may frighten or excite dog. Only interact with dogs who are under control and will sit for the handler.

Do Look at the dog’s paws while you greet him – some dogs may interpret a direct stare into the eyes as a challenge and may growl or bite in response.

Do Be sure dog sees you before coming close – a dog surprised by a sudden touch may bite.

Do Stand shoulder facing to dog – sideways is less threatening to a dog and avoids the possibility of leaning over the dog; if the dog does lunge and bite, then the shoulder, not the face will be the first point of contact.

Do Extend hand held in fist for dog to sniff – if dog bites damage could be less than if fingers are extended; puppies are less likely to nip at fist than outstretched fingers.

Do Move away sideways slowly if dog is not interested – forcing an interaction or rapidly jumping back may irritate or excite the dog.

Do Move away sideways slowly if dog pulls back or is not sniffing and wagging – forcing an interaction or rapidly jumping back may irritate or excite the dog.

Do Crouch sideways to greet small dogs or dogs that are lying down – crouching is less intimidating and avoids the possibility of bending over the dog.

Do Pet dog on side of neck or on chest – this ensures that the hand does not come over the dog’s head (some dogs find this threatening); avoids possibility of rubbing a dog with sore ears; most dogs enjoy neck and chest rubs.

Do Move your hand away slowly when finished petting – rapid movement may frighten or excite dog.

Do Drop a treat in front of dog – avoids the possibility of dog snatching treat from child’s hand and biting by mistake.

Do Respect senior dogs – older dogs can have failing eyesight or hearing and can have pain or illness that may affect their judgement or disposition; children should be encouraged not to approach dogs with gray muzzles unless dog is clearly wanting their attention.

Do Respect injured or ill dogs – dogs that are limping, have bandages or other signs of injury or illness should not be approached.

Interacting with Family or Friend’s Dog

Do Behave calmly around the dog - rapid movement or loud voices may frighten or excite dog.

Do Respect dog’s resting place - some dogs are possessive about their resting place (even if they are in a prohibited location) and may bite to protect their space.

Do Respect dog’s possessions – some dogs are possessive of their toys, bones or items that they have stolen and may interpret any approach to be a threat to the possession; they may bite to protect the possession.

Do Respect dog’s feeding place, food and water dishes – some dogs are possessive of their feeding place, dishes, food and water and may consider any approach to these as a threat; they may bite to protect their food or food-related area and possessions; they may protect their food dishes and area even if they are not actually eating at the time.

Do *Ask an adult to recover stolen property from the dog* – a child should never attempt to take any item away from a dog, even if the item was stolen by the dog from the child; an adult should be asked to regain the item.

Do *Play safe games with dog (see list of safe games at end of this guide)* - safe games are those that do not involve children running with dogs, wrestling or other forms of direct contact, tugging or otherwise competing for items with the dog.

Do *“Be a tree” if the dog gets too excited or becomes aggressive (see photographic description on game board)* – trees are boring to dogs – no movement; no sound – this is a child’s best defense against a dog bite; the dog will quickly lose interest and will wander away; the child should stay in the tree position until the dog is out of sight or an adult comes to help if the dog is frightening the child.

Do *Approach dog only if dog is awake* – an unexpected touch could startle a sleeping dog, resulting in a bite; the dog could be dreaming of being a great hunter and could incorporate a nearby child into the dream.

Do *Approach dog only if dog is not in possession of any item* - some dogs are possessive of their toys, bones or items that they have stolen and may interpret any approach to be a threat to the possession; they may bite to protect the possession.

Do *Approach dog only if dog seems friendly* – consider body posture before approaching even a family or friend’s dog; dogs can have bad days just like people.

Do *Err on the side of caution* – if there is any uncertainty about the dog’s emotional state then stay away.

Interaction – Don’ts

These don’ts apply to all children’s interactions with all dogs (even their own dog) at all times – no exceptions.

Don’t Put your arms around dog to give him a hug – this is a common reason for family dogs to bite a child; dogs do not naturally enjoy hugging; this bite will likely be in the face since this is the closest part to the dog.

Don’t Sit on a dog’s back – this may startle or annoy a dog and he may bite.

Don’t Put your face right up to a dog’s face – this may startle or annoy a dog and he may bite; the bite will be in the face.

Don’t Play dangerous games with a dog (see list of dangerous games at the end of this guide) – dangerous games are those that involve children running with the dog, tugging with the dog or any form of physical contact with the dog; even a non-aggressive dog can get so worked up by these games that he sees the child as a prey object.

Don’t Put your hand into a car, crate, pen or room in which a dog is confined - dog may bite out of fear or to protect his resting place or may move and trap a small hand in the bars.

Don’t Approach a tied dog - dog may bite out of fear or to protect his area; dog may jump due to excitement and could injure a child or himself.

Don’t Approach a dog who is eating, drinking, chewing on or lying beside any object – the dog may interpret an approach as a threat to his possessions or food and may bite to protect these.

Don’t Enter a property where a dog lives in order to retrieve a lost ball or other object – ask the home owner for help – a dog may bite to protect his property; this could happen even if the child knows the dog and the dog has been friendly at other times or in other locations.

Don’t Pull your hand away or back away from a dog as he tries to sniff – this action excites the dog and makes him want all the more to sniff and reach for the hand.

Don’t Run away crying or screaming from any dog, not matter how scary he seems – a child running and crying may seem like prey to a dog – even a normally non-aggressive dog – the dog’s natural inclination is to chase, attack and tear the prey apart; a child faced with a loose dog should “make like a tree” (see tree on game board for instructions); the dog will get bored and leave the child alone; the very rare dog who is severely emotionally disturbed may attack anyway; in this case the child should lie like a log if knocked down, face down on the ground using his hands to protect the back of his neck and forearms to protect his face.

Don't Back away from a dog that is growling or barking – movement is an action trigger for dogs – a dominant dog may interpret the movement as insubordinate – an insecure dog may become braver and more aggressive – a terrified child walking backwards could easily fall, triggering an attack; a child faced with a growling dog should “make like a tree” (see tree on game board for instructions); the dog will see the child as non-threatening and will most likely leave the child alone; the very rare dog who is severely emotionally disturbed may attack anyway; in this case the child should lie like a log if knocked down, face down on the ground using his hands to protect the back of his neck and forearms to protect his face.

Don't Rely on breed stereotypes or fluffiness in judging whether a dog is safe to approach – any dog of any breed can bite; children could be at greater risk from breeds with reputations for nice temperament since they are less likely to be cautious with these; the same degree of caution applies to all dogs, regardless of how they look; decisions may be simplified for the child if certain breeds or dogs with characteristics that make body postures impossible to read are off limits.

Don't Interact with any dog unless there is an adult supervising – the unexpected can happen; the degree of supervision depends on the individual characteristics of the dog and child, but absence of supervision endangers the child and the dog.

Displaced Behavior:

Displaced behavior is any behavior offered by the dog in an inappropriate context as a result of internal conflict. Common types of displaced behavior include licking the chops when there is no food, yawning when not tired, scratching when not itchy, wet dog shake when not wet or dirty, sudden grooming or biting at paws or other areas for no apparent reason. For example, a dog is told to stay and he wants to get up; he may displace the getting up behavior that he is suppressing, with one of the out of context behaviors listed above. If he is being bothered by a child he may suppress the desired behavior of biting or getting up and moving away, and displace this with a yawn or a sudden need to scratch. Children should be taught and adults should be aware that displaced behavior signals conflict in the mind of the dog and is a clear indication that the dog has had enough. The occurrence of displaced behavior when interacting

with a child is a warning sign that it is time for the child to leave the dog alone.

SAFE GAMES

Safe games include any game in which there is no direct contact between dog and child and during which the dog and child are not excited. All games should be supervised by an adult.

Examples include:

1. Obedience games such as calling the dog from person to person and rewarding him for sitting in front of each person.
2. Fetch – as long as the dog drops the retrieved item or delivers it to hand and then backs away without trying to play tug-of-war or snatch the item.
3. Hide and seek with an item – the child hides a treat or toy and dog must find it.
4. Hide and seek with people – the child hides and the dog must find him.
5. Teaching tricks to the dog.

DANGEROUS GAMES

Dangerous games include any games in which there is direct contact between child and dog, the dog is chasing the child, the dog is stealing items to instigate a chase, the dog is overly excited or the strength of the dog is pitted against the strength of the child.

Examples include:

1. Tug-of-war.
2. Chase-me games.
3. Wrestling games.

DANGER SIGNS

If your dog shows any of the following behaviors toward family members or guests, there is a serious bite risk and a canine behaviorist should be consulted (dog should never be loose around children):

- Growls, snarls, lunges or snaps (even if this is to protect a person or food bowl);
- Raises tail when approaching children or when approached by children.