

Keeping Children Safe from Dog Bites
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Aggressive behavior is the most common type of problem seen by most animal behavior specialists. Dog bites seem to be much more common than cat bites, although many experts feel cat bites are even more under-reported than bites from dogs.

Children are the most frequent victims of dog bites, with one study finding that almost half of schoolage children report being bitten by a dog at least once. Dog bites have been called a national public health epidemic, as their frequency is more common than cases of measles, mumps and whooping cough combined.

Unfortunately, very little research is being conducted to determine how bites can best be prevented. Effective prevention programs must address a variety of contributing factors including the behavior of the dog, the behavior of the victim, responsible dog ownership, as well as effective and reasonable animal control ordinances.

Whether or not most dog bites are “provoked” is controversial. If provocation means the dog bit for a reason, then most all bites can be considered to be provoked because aggressive behavior rarely occurs without a triggering stimulus. Alternatively, provocation can mean the victim was purposefully attempting to hurt, threaten or intimidate the dog, but many bites do not involve such behavior from the victim.

People, especially children, can approach dogs in ways that unintentionally threaten or frighten them. Children should be instructed to never pet an unfamiliar dog without permission from and supervision by the dog’s owner. The dog should be allowed to approach the child in a controlled way, such as on a leash, rather than the child going to the dog.

A good way to start is to have the child drop several food treats on the ground, so that the dog approaches in a friendly frame of mind. The dog can then sniff a food treat the child holds in her hand. If the dog seems comfortable, the child can open her hand, allowing the dog to take the treat while gently scratching him under the chin (not over the head).

Direct eye contact with the dog should be avoided as well as any hugging or quick movements toward the dog. Because both children and dogs can be unpredictable, all interactions between children and dogs should be well supervised by an adult.