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## **Why Dogs Bite: A Guideline For Children**

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Provided to FORDOG by the Sacramento SPCA

### **EXCITEMENT**

The noises and movements you make when you play are very exciting to dogs. When dogs play with other dogs, they often play roughly with their sharp teeth and claws. Sometimes dogs forget that they can't play the same way with you, and because they don't have hands, they use their mouths to grab things. A dog can hurt you by accident, just by being too excited.

**What you should do:** Play gently and calmly, and if a dog gets too excited, freeze and walk away. Take some time out to give you both a chance to calm down.

### **PAIN OR SICKNESS**

When a dog is in pain, he doesn't understand where the pain is coming from. If you touch him, he may think you are causing the pain and will bite you to stop the pain.

**What you should do:** If a dog is acting like he is sick or hurt, leave him alone – even if he belongs to your family. Tell an adult, and together you can get medical help for the dog.

### **ANGER**

A dog will protect anything that is important to him: his toys; his bed; his food and water bowls; his people; his yard; his house; or his car. If you come near something that a dog feels is off-limits to you, he may bite to make you leave his "property" alone!

### **FEAR OR SURPRISE**

Quick movements and sudden or loud noises are scary for dogs, and they might bite to protect themselves. If a dog thinks you're a stranger who might hurt him, he may not know how to get away, so he'll protect himself by biting.

**What you should do:** When you're around a dog you don't know, be quiet and move slowly. Always ask the dog's owner for permission to pet him. If the owner isn't there for you to ask, LEAVE THE DOG ALONE.

### **Starting off right**

Following are some guidelines for you to start off on the right foot. Remember, small children should never be left alone with a dog or puppy without adult supervision.

**Holding:**

- It's safest for both your child and puppy if your child is sitting down whenever he wants to hold the puppy. Puppies are squirmy and wiggly and may easily fall out of a young child's arms and may be injured. If held insecurely, a puppy may become frightened and snap or scratch in response. After your child is sitting, you can place the puppy in his arms.
- Have your child offer the puppy a chew toy while he pets the puppy. When puppies are teething, they tend to chew on everything, including hands and arms, so having a chew toy handy will divert the puppy's teeth away from your child. An added benefit is that the puppy will come to associate pleasant consequences (getting a treat) with being held by your child.
- For larger dogs, have your child sit in your lap and let the dog approach both of you. This way you can control your child and not let him "get carried away" with pats that are too rough. You are also there to teach your new dog to treat your child gently.

**Petting and giving affection:** Children often want to hug dogs around the neck. Your dog may view this as a threatening gesture, rather than an affectionate one, and may react with a growl, snap or bite. You should teach your child to pet your dog from underneath the dog's chin, rather than hugging him or reaching over his head. You should also teach your child to avoid staring at, or looking directly into, your dog's eyes.

**Giving Treats:** Children tend to become somewhat fearful and anxious when a dog tries to take a treat from their hand. This causes them to jerk their hand away at the last second. The dog may then jump up or lunge to get the treat which may result in the child being knocked down. Have your child place the treat in an open palm, rather than holding it in his fingers. You may want to place a hand underneath your child's hand to help guide him.

**Supervising Play:** Children move with quick, jerky movements; have high-pitched voices and often run, rather than walk. All of these behaviors somewhat resemble the behavior of prey animals. Almost all of a dog's play behaviors are based on predatory behavior. Consequently, your dog may respond to your child's behavior by chasing him, nipping at his heels, jumping up at him or even trying to knock him down.

At first, your child may need to play quietly around your new dog until he becomes more comfortable and calm and your child has gained control over the dog. Your dog must also learn that certain behaviors on his part are unacceptable, but he must also be taught what behaviors are the right ones. Our handout: "Dealing with Normal Puppy Behavior: Nipping and Rough Play" outlines procedures for discouraging rough play and encouraging appropriate play. However, most children under the age of ten are not capable of carrying out these procedures, so it's help to teach your dog a "leave it" command that you can use when play gets too rough. Taking an obedience class together is a good way to teach your dog to respond to commands.

An approach that is not helpful is to punish your dog for his behavior. If he learns that being around children always results in "bad things" happening to him, he may become defensive in their presence.

**Possessions:** Your dog won't know the difference between his toys and your child's toys until you teach him.

- Your child must take responsibility for keeping his playthings out of your dog's reach.
- If, and only if, you catch your dog chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, then give him an acceptable chew toy and praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Don't give your dog objects to play with such as old socks, old shoes or old children's toys that closely resemble items that are off-limits. They can't tell the difference!

**If your dog is growling or snapping at your child for any reason, the situation needs IMMEDIATE attention. Punishing your dog is likely to make things worse. You may call our Dog Behavior Help Line at (916) 383-7387, Ext. 9148 for more information.**