

Biting

Beth Bradley

If you have a dog in your life, you know that domestic dogs retain some of the instincts and impulses of their canine ancestors: “If it moves, chase it! If it stinks, roll in it! If you want to claim it, pee on it!” These behaviors, which serve their wild counterparts well, are generally frowned upon in the world that domestic dogs share with people. While some holdover behaviors are mere annoyances, a dog’s urge to use its teeth is a serious issue that must be addressed immediately and with no equivocation.

All Bites are Not Created Equal

As canines grow and interact with others, they develop “bite inhibition,” which is the ability to adjust the intensity of a bite for different situations. They learn to distinguish between the way they use their teeth when playing, hunting, defending, challenging, and attacking. In domestic dogs, especially family dogs, the definition of bite inhibition must expand to include the option of not biting at all—of leaving the situation instead of using teeth. Your dog is not trying to survive in the wild. He does not need a bite for hunting, fighting, or attacking. When choosing the appropriate response, he must recognize that there are NO situations in which it is appropriate to bite you or other people or dogs he encounters. (Dogs that are used for protection or guard work are carefully evaluated, selected, and trained by professionals. Do not make the mistake of thinking you can allow your dog to behave aggressively with strangers so that he will “protect” you. Unless specifically and professionally trained, a “protective” dog is a lawsuit waiting to happen.)

Teaching Puppies Bite Inhibition

Most dogs begin learning bite inhibition when they are pups. Because dogs use their mouths when interacting with other dogs, it is important that they learn to modulate the pressure of a “play bite” so that it does not do the damage that an “attack bite” would. Bite inhibition education begins with the dam, or mother dog. A puppy that feeds too roughly soon realizes that if he doesn’t lighten up, the “meal” will walk away. If removing the food source doesn’t work, the dam will get her point across by grabbing the pup with her mouth. The way the mother grabs the pup is an example of bite inhibition at work: She adjusts the pressure of her mouth to be firm enough to make a point, but not so intense as to cause injury to the pup. Similarly, a puppy that bites too hard in play will discover that his littermates don’t want to play with him. If the offending pup persists, other pups will eventually fight back. In both of these interactions, the pups learn to adjust their “bite” so that it is appropriate to the situation.

When you bring a puppy into your family, you must continue the pup's "bite inhibition" education. Bite inhibition demonstrates that dogs can adjust their urge to bite for different situations. Therefore, your pup can—and must—learn that there are situations in which "not biting" is the only appropriate choice. Do not allow your pup to nip you during play, to mouth your arm or hand when putting on the leash or collar, or to chew on your fingers because it seems so cute. If you are firm and consistent, your pup will soon understand that using his teeth on people—in play, fear, frustration, or aggression—is not an option.

Adult Dogs That Bite

If you have an adult dog that bites, you have a difficult—and urgent-- problem. In adult dogs, the urge to bite is more difficult to eradicate.

The problem may have started because your dog previously got away with a growl or snap to another dog. Maybe he feels the urge to bite from fearfulness, or because someone once stepped on his tail. To be frank, understanding the origin of the problem is not nearly as important as recognizing the potential consequences. Unless you immediately acknowledge and address your dog's potential to bite, you run several significant risks.

- Your dog may seriously injure you or someone else.
- You may be liable for significant financial damages.
- Your dog could be euthanized.

Different states have different laws related to dog bites. However, the majority of states have laws that hold the dog's owner 100% responsible for all financial damages, and many states allow dog bite victims to sue for pain and suffering as well as medical bills. Furthermore, many municipalities take aggressive action against dogs that bite, including court-mandated euthanasia.

Separate for Safety

Through my many years of experience with dogs, I have learned that a dog that bites once will, if given the opportunity, bite again. It is up to you to ensure that he does not find an opportunity. At the very first sign of the problem, take steps to eliminate any chance for your dog to bite. When someone comes to your home, put your dog in a separate room. When you are walking with your dog, keep your distance from other people and animals.

You can't possibly predict every circumstance that may cause your dog to react. He may suddenly become possessive over a toy or bone he has previously ignored, or he may simply have a bad reaction to a new person or environment. For this reason, you must be overly cautious. If your dog bites, you have no room for error.

- Use an appropriate collar and leash every time you leave your home. Check them each time you use them to make sure they are in good condition. A lunging dog can snap a weak or damaged leash.
- Focus 100% of your attention on your dog and your surroundings when you are out and about, even if you are just sitting on a bench in the park. If you are on the phone, taking pictures, or reading a book, you cannot be fully alert to potential problems.
- Be prepared to firmly and clearly refuse people who want to approach your dog: “Please don’t come any closer. My dog bites.” Amazingly, some people will persist. Be as blunt and emphatic as you need to be to make the person stop approaching or trying to pet your dog. No matter what, do not let the person or other dog get close enough for your dog to bite. If necessary, turn and walk away in the opposite direction. Do not worry that you might appear rude or hurt the person’s feelings. A person can recover far more quickly from hurt feelings than from a dog bite.
- Avoid events and environments where you cannot easily keep a safe distance between your dog and other people and dogs. The crowds and chaos of a parade, festival, street fair, farmer’s market, or block party are stressful for any dog. Taking a dog that bites to such activities is inviting disaster.
- Do not take your dog to a dog park or any other place where you know that other dogs are likely to be off-leash. You will not be able to stop other dogs from approaching your dog.
- Watch out for children. Some children will run up to a dog quickly before their parents can stop them. If you are in an area where children are playing or running around, be on high alert and get ready to put your dog behind you if a child heads your way.

Get Professional Help

A dog that has bitten or shows an inclination to bite needs professional training. A trainer can advise you on a training program and training techniques that minimize the chances that your dog will bite again. This in no way means that you will have to wear kid gloves when interacting with your dog. Rather, the trainer will teach you strategies to safely but effectively correct and control your dog in situations that have a strong potential for a bite to occur, such as when your dog has a bone or is on the couch.

Keep in mind that training works only when the dog respects the person giving the commands. Children, strangers, or others that your dog does not know or accept as leaders are at risk. If you are dealing with a situation, such as getting your dog off the furniture, do not allow guests or children to remain in the room. While your dog may not bite you, he may satisfy his urge to bite by turning on one of them.

Now What?

Your dog will have to be involved in a strict training program most of his life. This problem never goes away completely; the moment you relax your training, your dog will begin to test you. You and your trainer will determine the type and frequency of training sessions that are required to ensure you stay on top of the situation and recognize setbacks or improvements.

Do not be lulled into a false sense of security. No matter how well things are going, do not assume your dog's urge to bite has disappeared. A more likely explanation is that he simply hasn't encountered a situation or stimulus that sets him off. If, over time, there are no incidents, do not take this as a sign you can relax your precautions. Rather, recognize it as a sign that your precautions are working.

Conclusion

While most dogs develop bite inhibition that can be expanded to include "not biting at all," some dogs reach adulthood with poorly developed or non-existent bite inhibition. Having any dog in your life is a big responsibility, but having a dog with a tendency to bite is an enormous responsibility. It is a responsibility that requires vigilance, perseverance, and professional training. Biting, unfortunately, is a problem that is never completely solved. However, with professional training and sensible precautions, it is a problem that can be effectively and safely controlled so that you and your dog can enjoy many happy years together.

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

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