

# Preventing dog bites: A guide for safer interactions

An important part of dog bite prevention is recognizing the behaviors that signal Fido is uncomfortable. Stephen Appelbaum, ABCDT, president and CEO of Animal Behavior College, shares things to keep in mind when introducing your dog to new situations.



## Why might a dog bite?

Dogs bite for numerous reasons. These include fear, pain, dominance and territoriality, both learned and predatory. Probably the most common reason is fear. Usually the dog displays plenty of warning signs to the person, growling, trying to escape, and so on. People don't always understand the language, or ignore or minimize the signs. If there are no other options, the dog, depending on the situation, will bite.

## What should you keep in mind when introducing your dog to new situations and people?

It depends on the dog. For most dogs, it's a matter of letting them slowly adjust and get used to the new situation. Most dogs are social and like to interact with new people. However, gradual introductions are best. Dogs are very receptive to friendly people who greet them using slow, easy movements along with praise.

## What body language should you look for that signals your dog is uncomfortable—especially around children?

You should look for fear indicators. These include the dog's ears being held back, tail is tucked, attempts to run away to escape (not play), hackles raised, growling, whining, barking and snapping. The challenge with children is they like to grab and hold. Many dogs find this threatening and will thrash wildly to escape. If the dog exhibits these responses, talk with the children about safe interaction and talk to your veterinarian or a dog trainer about training the dog. Dominant challenging behaviors can also be an issue. Dogs that become possessive of objects, food or places—like a bed or couch—need to be trained and watched. Possessiveness usually manifests itself when the dog believes you're going to take away objects or encroach on his space. You can stop this behavior, but remember that it takes time and proper training.



## What should you do after recognizing these signals?

Aggression is challenging because there isn't much leeway for error. However, if you notice any of the body language that signals the dog is uncomfortable, stop the children's behavior that stimulated the response and contact a professional trainer, behaviorist or veterinarian right away.

## What's a no-no when it comes to having dogs and children in the same space?

Dogs need some space to relax without having constant stimulation and intrusions. A safe spot such as a crate or large dog bed where the kids are taught to leave the dog alone is a good start.

