

“My Dog Won’t Bite”

Each year, about 4.5 million Americans will be bitten by a dog. About 885,000 will seek medical attention; half of these are children. Of these bites, many of dogs are euthanized either by their owners or animal welfare organizations for “vicious” behavior.

At this point, you are probably thinking to yourself, “It’s a shame that people turn their dogs into vicious animals,” or “That’s why I got a Lab/Golden Retriever/Pug, so I don’t have THAT kind of dog.”

MAC

Several years ago, I was the owner of a beautiful 7 year-old Lab/Rhodesian mix who I had adopted at only five weeks old. Mac was well-behaved and well-loved. I was 100% certain I knew my dog. One day, when some neighbor kids asked to pet him, I didn’t hesitate. A teenage girl walked up to Mac, grabbed his head and tried to kiss him on the nose. She required 52 stitches and two plastic surgeries to repair the damage from one bite. My insurance company settled her case two years later for over \$100,000.00.

BITING BREEDS?

The first question I am asked when I tell Mac’s story is “What kind of dog was he?” I’m sure most people expect me to answer Pit Bull, Rottweiler or some other “dangerous breed.” They are always shocked when I say “lab mix.”

YOUR DOG IS MORE LIKELY TO BITE WHEN:

- Not Neutered In Season
- Chained/Restrained
- Sick/Injured
- Recovering From Surgery
- In Their Own Yard/House
- Eating
- Sleeping
- Caring for Puppies

Of course, other factors can always play a role, so do not assume that your dog won’t bite just because the above situations don’t apply.

Thanks to irresponsible journalism, our society has been led to believe that certain breeds are more dangerous than others. The latest fad focuses on the Pit Bull Terrier (which actually lumps several breeds into one group). Ten years ago it was the Rottweiler. Twenty years ago it was the Doberman Pinscher. Which breeds were most popular around those times? Pit Bulls, Rottweilers and Dobermans, respectively. It then stands to reason that increased numbers of a particular breed will also increase the number of bites and attacks by that breed. If half the country went out and bought a Volkswagen Beetle, there would be a sudden increase in accidents involving Volkswagen Beetles. Not because the car is defective or more dangerous, but simply because there are more of them. Since I have become a trainer, I have heard many stories of dog bites. So far, not one of them has involved a “dangerous” breed.

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- A Weimaraner, who was chewing a bone at the time, bit his owner in the face for trying to hug him.
- A Jack Russell repeatedly bit his young owner when she tried to push him off her bed (she required 57 stitches).
- Two Boston Terriers removed the tip of their owner’s finger when he tried to break up a fight between them.
- A Golden Retriever, a long time family pet, bit a toddler “for no reason.” When the owners took him in to be euthanized, the vet discovered a pencil shoved in the dog’s ear canal.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR YOUR DOG TO BITE?

Many of the bites listed above would be described as “normal aggression” in the dog training world. The Jack Russell was protecting his territory from an intruder. The Weimaraner was protecting his food.

“ONE BITE” RULE?

California dog owners are automatically liable for injuries caused by their dog, whether or not the dog was known to be capable of injury. There is no “One Bite Rule” in California.

These days, animal control agencies, landlords and insurance companies are less tolerant of even minor infractions by dogs. Any injury could cost you your apartment, your homeowner’s insurance, or even your dog’s life.

NOT MY DOG

If you are still thinking that your dog won’t bite, is too small to inflict serious damage, or is a breed known for being friendly and easygoing, roll up a newspaper and hit yourself several times on the head. Now repeat after me:

- Every dog bites
- Aggression is normal behavior
- My dog will act aggressively under the right, or wrong, circumstances



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Excellent! Now, here are some tips for keeping you and your dog out of trouble:

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SAY “NO”

Not to your dog, but to strangers. There are many well-meaning dog lovers out there who don't have a clue about how to approach a dog. If your dog appears too nervous, just say “Thanks, but she's in training.”

You are the only one who controls your dog's environment. If something goes wrong, the blame is on you and no one else.

DON'T IGNORE WARNING SIGNS

Warning Sign #1: Your dog growls at you or other people.

Warning Sign #2: Your dog is hesitant to give up possessions such as toys, bones or food.

Warning Sign #3: Your dog has “come close” to biting, or has bitten without injury.

If your dog has shown any of these behaviors, consider yourself warned and contact a trainer or behaviorist. Unfortunately, most owners are either quick to justify the behavior, or they completely fail to see it at all.

I can't say it enough: Just because your dog hasn't bitten before, doesn't mean he or she won't in the future.

DON'T MAKE EXCUSES

Take potential behavior problems and warning signs seriously. Mac gave me several warnings over 7 years, which I made excuses for. Those excuses almost cost him his life.

IF YOUR DOG BITES SOMEONE

Confine your dog immediately and check on the victim's condition. If necessary, seek medical help.

Provide the victim with important information, such as the date of your dog's last rabies vaccination.

Cooperate with the animal control officer responsible for acquiring information about your dog.

If your dog must be quarantined for any length of time, ask whether they may be confined in your home or at your veterinary hospital. Strictly follow the quarantine requirements for your dog.

Seek professional help to prevent your dog from biting again.

If your dog's dangerous behavior cannot be controlled, do not give him to someone else without carefully evaluating that person's ability to protect them and prevent them from biting. Because you know your dog is dangerous, you may be held liable for any damage they do even when they are given to someone else.



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KNOW YOUR BREED

Even if your dog is a mixed-breed, the tendencies of those breeds still remain.

These instincts, drives and genetics exist in every dog, no matter how they were raised, what breeder they came from, or whether or not they’ve displayed the behaviors previously. Understanding your dog’s natural instincts and genetic disposition will help you remain vigilant of situations where your dog is likely to follow their instincts, but fail by human standards.

CONCLUSION

Based on the number of dogs in the United States versus the number of dog bites reported every year, the majority of dogs aren’t biting.

I was fortunate that Mac was not euthanized for his actions, although animal control considered it. It took the efforts of friends and family and an attorney to save his life.

Having been in the position to regret not protecting my dog from a situation where he felt the need to bite, I would rather be overly cautious than forever sorry.

— Lisa Mullinax



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