

# Safety First

by Norma Bennett Woolf

High pitched laughter peeling behind her, Nancy ran around the corner of the house smack dab into the dog chained by the garage. Unnerved by the noise and startled by the child, the dog lunged and bit Nancy on the nose. She screamed, and the dog bit again. Nancy ended up with several stitches in her face and nightmares; the dog was euthanized for biting, and both families were traumatized. The tragedy could have been avoided if Nancy's folks and the dog's owners had been prepared.

First of all, a dog should never be chained outside unattended. Most dogs of guard or working heritage suffer personality quirks when tied and many become downright aggressive. Dogs are better off in fenced areas where they can see the barrier between them and the world, where they can feel somewhat safe from noisy, frolicking children. In addition, many dogs instinctively equate the high-pitched sounds of children with the distress sounds of prey animals, and they react by biting the child as they would have bitten the prey animal in the wild.

Second, children should be taught how to behave around dogs, even if their own family does not own a dog. For example, a child should never approach a strange dog without asking the owner if it's okay to pat the dog. If the child sees a loose dog on the street, he should not approach it even if he knows the dog belongs to his friend. He should tell someone that he saw the dog, but should make no attempt to grab it.

Nor should he scream and run away, for these actions can result in an attack by the dog. A running being frequently says "prey" to the dog and triggers the chase response in his brain. Once triggered, this response is almost impossible to interrupt. The dog is reacting to chemical stimulus, not rational thought, and is extremely difficult to sidetrack.

Most dogs, even those that are well trained, do not consider children as figures of authority. Furthermore, since children frequently stare intently at animals, a dog may feel threatened by this short person who is trying to catch him. Even the best natured dog may bite to protect himself in these circumstances, especially if he feels cornered.

Once a child is given permission to approach a dog, she should present her closed fist for the dog to sniff. This protects the fingers in case the dog is frightened and tries to nip.

Children should never hug a dog that is not their own, and should only hug their own dog very gently if the dog can tolerate the hug. Children should be taught to never hit dogs with their hands or an object, to lower their voices when playing with the dog, to

leave the dog alone when he's sleeping, eating or ill and to never tease a dog in any fashion. Many dog bites occur because the child teases the pet beyond endurance.

Dog owners share the responsibility for bite prevention as well. They should socialize their puppies to small children at an early age. (It helps to buy from a breeder who has started this socialization prior to the puppy purchase, for the younger the puppy is exposed to gentle children, the more tolerant of children it will become.)

Socialization can be as simple as walking the dog near a playground where children are making noise, running about, playing ball or frisbee or soccer or walking through the neighborhood while the kids wait for the school bus. The dog can be told to walk at heel through a crowd of children, to sit-stay and watch the play or allow the children to pet his head, to down-stay until the end of the game. Constant exposure of this type accustoms the dog to the presence and antics of children.

The dog should never be left alone with a child less than five years of age, for a young child may challenge or injure the dog unintentionally, and the result could be tragic. Dogs and children should be separated at snack time so the dog doesn't learn to steal food from tiny hands.

The dog should have a place he can call his own, a retreat, a private room, a den. This can be a pen in the back yard or a crate in the house. The children should never be allowed to bother the dog when he is in his place.

If the dog has access to a fenced yard, owners should make sure that neighborhood children cannot accidentally or intentionally tease him. Kids often begin by goading the dog to bark, then to snap. Or they may throw thing at him to chase him away from the fence. However it begins the end result is usually the same: the kids learn that teasing the dog gives them a feeling of power tinged with the possibility of danger and the dog learns to hate kids. This hatred may manifest as fear or as aggression and may end when a child is bitten and the dog is taken to the pound to be placed in a new home (if lucky).

The sight of a child and a dog napping together on the sofa or floor, playing in the yard, or contemplating the sunset is a wondrous thing. The potential relationship between a child and dog who considers himself the family guardian is precious and needs to be nurtured and guided. Families can accomplish this by teaching the dog and child to respect and cherish each other. If this can be done, fewer children will be bitten and fewer dogs will be euthanized for aggressive behavior.