

The Truth about Dogs with Bite Histories

It's a something that most dog owners have in the back of their minds – the horror of finding out, either first or secondhand, that your dog has bitten someone. In some cases you know that it is a possibility, in other cases you're completely stunned that your dog could do something like this. While you're reeling from the information, trying to decide what to do, here are some things to consider.

1) How bad was the bite? Dr. Ian Dunbar, a veterinarian and respected dog trainer, grades bites on a level of 1-6:

1. Did the bite leave no evidence of damage?
2. Teeth made contact, but no pressure was used.
3. One to three punctures in a single bite, none deeper than $\frac{1}{2}$ the length of a canine tooth.
4. One to four punctures, with at least one puncture deeper than $\frac{1}{2}$ the length of a canine tooth. This means that the dog grabbed and shook what was in its mouth.
5. Multiple Level 4 bites.
6. Death.

Know that dogs don't "accidentally" bite. Puppies spend so much of their time playing, chewing, and putting things in their mouth so that they can learn the extent of their jaw's capabilities and strengths. If a dog puts teeth on you, but didn't actually bite down, it is exactly what he meant to do. If a dog leaves a puncture wound, it wasn't an accident, she put as much pressure into the bite as she thought she needed to.

A dog that issues a Level 1-3 bite is usually considered a good candidate for rehabilitation. Dogs with a history of bites that are Level 4 and higher are considered to be a much greater risk and not as likely to be safely rehabilitated.

2) What provoked the bite? If you know your dog is tense or fearful or protective in certain situations, and the dog was in one of the situations when he bit, you know what probably provoked him. Not all bites are obviously provoked, but many dogs give clear warnings before they bite that we humans never bother to see.

3) What was the dog's reaction after the bite? Did the dog bite and go back to sleep, did she bite and then run away, did she bite once and prepare to bite again?

4) Is this a dog that you still want in your home? If you no longer want the dog in your home, what reason would someone else have for taking this dog into their home?

5) In many states, including Wisconsin and Illinois, a dog must be quarantined for 10 days after issuing a bite that is recorded. During that time, the dog cannot be sold, given, returned or otherwise be placed into someone else's ownership. If proof of current rabies vaccination can be shown, the dog might be able to be quarantined at the home. If no current vaccination can be proved, the dog will need to be kenneled at a humane society, vet's office, or other place as determined by local laws. Any kenneling fees are the responsibility of the dog's owner.

It is becoming increasingly common for dogs with bite histories to cause companies to cancel insurance policies. Some municipalities will register dogs with bite histories as “dangerous dogs” and will impose restrictions on the dog’s owner.

Also keep in mind that some state laws may hold you liable for any further bites that the dog may issue if you rehome the dog, either before or after the required 10 day holding period is up. If it can be proved that you knew the dog is a bite risk, even if you chose not to disclose the fact to a new owner, you can still be held accountable.

If you would like to keep your dog in your family, you need to take measures to make sure that the dog is unlikely to bite again. Identify what provoked the bite and what can be done to manage it. This might include crating otherwise confining the dog in a room away from guests, employing muzzles, keeping the dog leashed and under the control of a responsible adult at all times, not allowing the dog in the yard unsupervised, working closely with a behaviorist or experienced trainer, or other management techniques that are deemed appropriate for the situation. You and your family must carefully consider whether these management techniques are possible and if so, will they be in place 100% of the time.

Working with a trainer is a must in dog bite cases. An applied animal behaviorist should be the first type of person that you look for. If a qualified applied animal behaviorist is not available, your next person to look for would be a trainer who is not only experienced in dealing with aggressive dogs, but is also comfortable meeting and working out training protocols for aggressive dogs. My suggestion is to find someone who uses positive reinforcement rather than compulsion training techniques, as these positive techniques can be issued by anyone, as opposed to compulsion techniques that use physical corrections, which are only effective if someone is big enough to correct the dog. Also, since many times dogs bite out of fear or stress, physical corrections can do more to worsen a problem than that help to resolve it. Regardless of the training methods used, **it is imperative that YOU work with the dog and trainer!!!** Sending your dog away to be trained by someone else is teaching the dog to respond to the trainer and not to you. As the responsibility of this dog will be upon you, you need to be learning training and management techniques right along with your dog.

A dog that bites isn’t automatically a bad dog. However, it is a dog that is in need of immediate behavior modification and a full physical and blood work up at the vet’s office. There are many, many reasons that a dog might bite, some obvious, and some not so obvious. Some dogs bite because they are afraid and feel the need to protect themselves. Other dogs bite because they feel that they are in charge and need to keep people in line. Still other dogs bite to protect themselves or what they perceive is theirs. Dogs may bite because of physical pain and it is possible for dogs to bite because of physical problems (like a tumor) or chemical imbalances in the brain.

In some cases the kindest or most responsible thing to do for the dog is to have it humanely euthanized. Dogs in physical pain that cannot be relieved are clearly miserable if they’re at the point that they bite. Dogs with mental illness or chemical imbalances can

be as sick as a dog with cancer or heart disease. As in the case with physical illness, sometimes mental illness cannot be treated and the pain is overwhelming enough that death is the kindest treatment. Some dogs that bite out of fear or protection have this learning, whether self-taught or human trained (and even well-meaning humans can unknowingly teach their dogs that biting is the best option), so well ingrained in their minds that it can't be trained out. Rather than sending a dog to a shelter or putting it into a home where it might once again make the choice to bite (and bite more severely than before), contacting the vet yourself so that the dog is euthanized in familiar surroundings can be a very, very difficult for you, but by far the most loving thing you can do for your dog.

Obviously, the best thing you can do for your dog is to train it to accept all situations. Your dog doesn't have to love all the situations you put it in, but it does have to be tolerant. Rational, sound people don't turn on friends and loved ones with knives or fists and inflict damage just because they are asked to do something they don't care to do. We can and should expect the same courtesy from our canine family and friends. Teaching your dog to accept handling, new and unusual people, and to deal with frustration, as well as picking up some self control skills, is the first step to preventing a dog bite before it can even happen.