

This Happens 3 Out of 4 Times Before a Dog Bites Your Face

Over 75% of victims of dog bites to the face know the dog, so it can happen even with your own family pet. The 3 seemingly innocent human actions that can raise your risk of a bite to your face, the often hidden warning signs a dog gives, and what to do when threatened by any dog.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study of dog bites to the face shows that one human behavior in particular – bending over a dog – precedes over 75% of bites
- In 19% of dog bites to the face, the victim had put his or her face close to the dog's face
- The study also confirms that the majority of bite victims are children under the age of 12

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Each year in the U.S., between 4.5 and 5 million people are bitten by dogs.

When a dog bite incident occurs, many people key in immediately on the animal's behavior or temperament rather than the precipitating event. However, there is almost always a precipitating event, whether or not the people involved are able to connect the dots.

Animal behavior experts are able to see these unfortunate incidents with an experienced eye. As canine behaviorist Karen London writes in *The Bark*:

"One disadvantage of being a canine behaviorist is that so many human behaviors scare me. My heart leaps into my throat all too often when I see people performing risky behaviors around dogs.

From hugging dogs and picking up dogs to sticking their faces right by a dog's face or bending over a dog, there are plenty of gasp-worthy moments. I see people performing these behaviors and want to scream out a warning."¹

London hears the same human behaviors mentioned over and over in the retelling of dog bite stories. And she points out that this isn't about placing blame, but about helping people learn how to lower their risk of being bitten.

Study Examines Dog Bites to the Face

In a recent study, university researchers set out to discover what human behaviors immediately preceded dog bites to the face.

They also wanted to gather data on the age and gender of bite victims, the sex and size of biting dogs, the locations on the face that were bitten, and the need for medical treatment.

The researchers analyzed 132 incidents of dog bites to the face, and reported these findings:

- Over 75% of the bite victims knew the dog, however, none of the victims was an adult dog owner
- In 19% of cases, the person had put his or her face close to the dog's face
- 60% of the bite victims were female
- In 5% of cases, the human and dog were gazing at each other
- Only adult dogs bit the face and over two-thirds were male dogs
- Over 50% of the bites were to the central area of the face around the nose and lips
- Only in 6% of cases was the dog observed to growl or show teeth as a warning before biting
- Over two-thirds of the bite victims were children, and 84% were under age 12
- The age and gender of the human didn't affect the location of the bite on the face
- 43% of the child dog bite victims were with their parents and 62% were with the dog's guardian
- Bites by large dogs were more often medically treated than bites by small dogs

Interestingly, incidents that one might assume would provoke a bite did not, including:

- Nail trims
- Pulling the dog's hair or tugging his body
- Stepping or falling on the dog
- Scolding or hitting the dog as punishment

The researchers concluded that:

"Risk factors such as bending over the dog, putting the face close to the dog's face and gazing between human and dog should be avoided, and children should be carefully and constantly supervised when in the presence of dogs."²

Dogs Often Give a Warning Before Biting

London was surprised to see from the study that only 6% of dogs were perceived or remembered by observers to have given a warning before biting, and in fact, she believes perhaps some people did not notice or failed to remember warnings by dogs.

This is because there are almost always signs before a dog bites. Some dogs will suddenly freeze in place and hold their body very rigid. Others will stand with front legs splayed and head low, gazing at you. And many dogs growl or curl their lips to show their teeth.

If you're ever in a situation in which you feel threatened by a dog, employ these defensive measures:

- Stand motionless with your hands at your sides

- Avoid eye contact with the dog
- If the dog loses interest, back away slowly
- If the dog comes at you anyway, offer him anything you're holding – a purse or jacket, for example – or anything that may distract him
- If you wind up on the ground, curl into a ball, put your hands over your ears and stay still – resist the urge to yell, scream, or move around

10 Tips to Prevent Dog Bites

1. Use good judgment when selecting a family pet and do your homework. If this is your first dog, or you don't know what to look for in a dog, talk with a veterinarian, a reputable breeder, or other knowledgeable person. Learn which dogs would be most likely to thrive in your family situation.
2. Make sure your puppy is well-socialized and trained to obey basic commands. Proper socialization is the single most important thing dog owners can do to reduce the risk of winding up with a pet with behavior problems.
3. Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise. Not only is regular aerobic exercise necessary for physical conditioning, it also provides the mental stimulation every dog needs to be well-balanced.
4. Playtime is important, but you should avoid games that are overly exciting to your pup or that pit him against you. And never put your dog in a situation where he feels teased or threatened.
5. Always use a leash or similar restraint when you're out in public with your pet. You must be able to control him in public, and if you can't, it's time for additional obedience training.
6. If you allow your dog out alone in a fenced yard, make sure gates are secure and there are no other escape routes available.
7. Take proactive care of your pet's health. Feed species-appropriate nutrition, make sure she is well-exercised, brush her teeth, bathe and groom her regularly, and take her for at least one, preferably two annual wellness visits with your veterinarian.
8. Proceed with extreme caution when it comes to vaccinating your pet. Evidence is mounting that vaccines, in particular the rabies vaccine, are contributing to the problem of aggression in some dogs. Since rabies vaccines are required by law, insist on the 3-year vaccine and avoid the 1-year shot. I recommend asking your holistic vet for the homeopathic rabies vaccine detox Lyssin after each rabies vaccine.
9. Also discuss with your vet the best time to sterilize your dog. Beyond reproductive concerns, intact pets are sometimes more aggressive than animals that have been neutered. Timing of this procedure is critical, and should be decided upon based on each dog's health status and personality.
10. Teach children – yours and any others who come around your dog – how to behave with an animal. Children are by far the most frequent victims of dog bites. They must learn to be both cautious and respectful in the presence of any dog, including their own. And never under any circumstances leave a baby or small child alone with a dog.

Sources and References

¹ [The Bark, October 30, 2015](#)

² [The Veterinary Journal Volume 206, Issue 3, December 2015, Pages 284-288](#)
