

Dog Bite Prevention: Dogs Bite When Humans Greet Inappropriately

By Dr. Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

Over 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs every year and about 800,000 of those bites are severe enough to warrant a trip to the hospital.

Based on my experience as a veterinarian focused on behavior, I feel safe in saying that the majority of people who are bitten think that the bite comes out of the blue or that the dog is just mean or unpredictable. The truth is that the majority of bites are actually due to fear and they occur because humans fail to recognize the signs of fear in dogs. To make matters worse, people often assume that dogs should be friendly with all people all the time and consequently they greet and interact with unfamiliar dogs in a way that is rude or scary.

Dave Dickinson, interim director of the Sacramento County Animal Care and Regulation explains why this type of greeting is a problem. "Oftentimes people get bitten because they see a dog they don't know. It's not acting aggressively. It's just kinda walking around. They go up to it and they think the first thing they should do is put their hand out and let the dog sniff their hand. The dog doesn't know they're reaching out in friendship. They're just coming at them."

One problem is that we've been told many times that you should greet a dog by letting him sniff your hand, but in reality, the best way to greet is to stay outside of the dog's personal bubble and let the dog approach you at his own rate.

Inappropriate greeters can put the life of fearful dogs at risk

If you're the owner of a dog who's already fearful of unfamiliar people, well-meaning strangers can present a huge risk.

"Often there will be people sitting on a bench or sidewalk and they reach out really quickly with an arm to pet [our dog Pixie]," says Jeremy Warren, the owner of a large wire-haired hunting dog mix whom they adopted as an adult. "If she's startled and scared enough she could react by snarling or lunging at them."

This was especially a problem when they first adopted Pixie. Says Jeremy, "Pixie was so bad when we first got her. She was just so afraid."

Fortunately for Pixie, her owners have invested the time into training her to be comfortable with more people but they always have to be on the lookout for trouble. They control their situation by interacting with people who want to reach out or pet Pixie and they do so before the rude greeting can occur. Then they are able to orchestrate a proper greeting instead, where Pixie receives a lot of rewards for calm behavior so she associates the strangers with good things. After the initial greeting, Pixie is friendly with the people and treats no longer need to be used.

Natalie Karst agrees that rude human behavior can be a problem. Her Border collie, Jack, had started becoming anxious and pacing and jumping when people moved too fast but he had never bitten until the day a salesman came to the door.

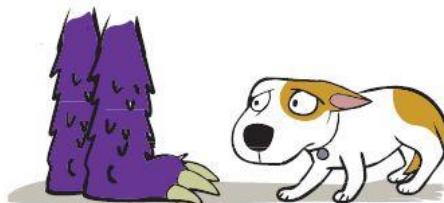
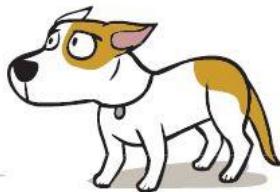
"I was blocking the doorway and keeping Jack behind me. Jack poked his way around, says Karst. "The salesman thought he was a dog expert and that dogs loved him. So he reached and grabbed Jack by the neck and rubbed his ears and patted him on the head. Then when the guy leaned forward to stand up, that's when Jack reacted by lunging and bit him on the nose."

Karst laments, "At that point we now had a dog that had actually bitten someone and we really had to change the way we handled him entirely to avoid having it become an animal control issue."

With two years of practice on the part of the Karst's, Jack is much more confident. "At this point we still protect him but we don't have to worry any more. We now have control of him." But she stressed that one factor throws a wrinkle into the plan. "I can contain [Jack], says Karst. "It's the other people I have trouble containing."

It's important to recognize the signs of fear and anxiety in dogs

Realistically, these rude human greetings that put fearful dogs at risk would not be an issue if the human could tell that the dogs are fearful. While many people might recognize the obvious signs of fear such as cowering, with the head low, ears back and tail between the legs, they may miss the signs if the dog is only cowering a little.



Slight Cowering

Major Cowering

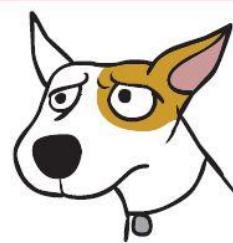
Plus there are more subtle signs of fear that are also important to recognize. Dogs who are anxious or afraid, may lick their lips when there is no food nearby, pant when they are not hot or thirsty, their ears may be pinned back or out to the side while their brows are furrowed.



Licking Lips
when no food nearby

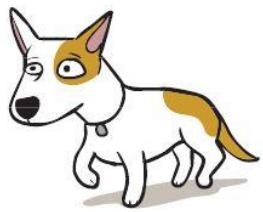


Panting
when not hot or thirsty



Brow Furrowed, Ears to Side

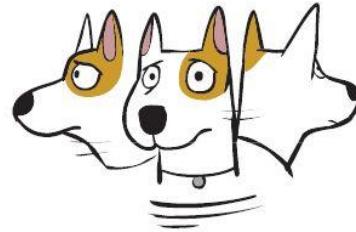
When scared or anxious, dogs may also move in slow motion the way you might tip toe if you were walking past sleeping lions. They may also yawn or act sleepy in situations where they shouldn't be tired. For instance in new environments most dogs will explore or interact with people and the environment. If a dog goes somewhere new such as to a veterinary hospital and acts much more sedate than normal, that calm demeanor is probably an indicator of fear. Dogs can also be hyper-vigilant when scared, meaning they look around in many directions the way you would if you were walking in the dark in a dangerous neighborhood.



Moving in Slow Motion
walking slow on floor

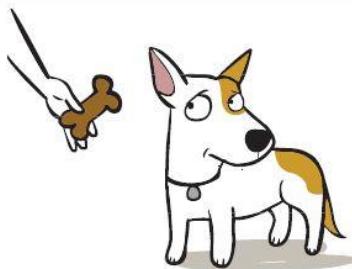


Acting Sleepy or Yawning
when they shouldn't be tired

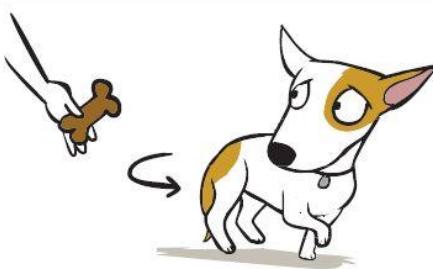


Hypervigilant
looking in many directions

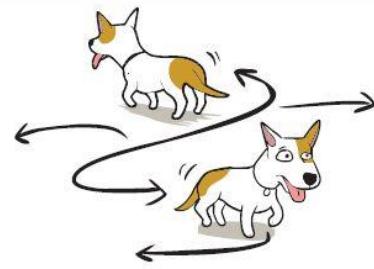
When fearful, dogs can also suddenly lose their appetite. But then an instant later when they feel more relaxed they may suddenly be willing to eat treats. Anxious or fearful dogs may also move or look away from the object that scares them even if they do so fleetingly. And they may pace aimlessly instead of walking with direction or lying down calmly.



Suddenly Won't Eat
but was hungry earlier



Moving Away



Pacing

As you can see, these body language signs of fear in dogs are pretty straightforward. When you see a dog exhibiting these signs as people approach, your job as the owner is to keep the potential greeter a safe distance away and to also train your dog to feel more comfortable. For the human who is approaching, the first rule is to ask the owner first, and then ask the dog. That means, turn slightly sideways so you're not facing the dog squarely or staring at him. Then let him approach at his own rate. If he shows any combination of signs of fear or anxiety, avoid reaching out to pet him.

HOW TO GREET A DOG (AND WHAT TO AVOID)

Appropriate greetings are common sense. Imagine if someone greeted you the way many people greet dogs!

Human to Human INCORRECT	Human to Dog INCORRECT	Human to Dog CORRECT
 Avoid reaching into their safety zone.	 Avoid reaching in or towards the dog's car.	 Stand a safe distance away so that you are not a threat.
 Avoid rushing up.	 Avoid rushing up.	 Approach slowly (at a relaxed walk).
 Avoid interactions without asking.	 Avoid interacting with unfamiliar dogs, especially if they're tied up.	 Ask if you can interact first.
 Avoid staring at people. This is scary.	 Avoid staring at or approaching head-on.	 Approach sideways and look using your peripheral vision.
 Avoid looming over.	 Avoid leaning over or towards dogs even when you change position to squat or get up.	 Stay outside the dog's bubble and present your side to the dog.
 Avoid reaching into personal space.	 Avoid reaching your hand out for the dog to sniff.	 Let the dog approach at his own rate.
 Avoid close interaction if the person is afraid of you.	 Avoid petting if the dog looks nervous or tense. Just admire him instead.	 It's OK to pet the dog if he looks relaxed, comes up to you, and solicits your attention by rubbing against you.
 Avoid touching inappropriately.	 Avoid hugging, kissing, and patting roughly. This is too familiar and disliked by many dogs.	 Pet gently.