

PARENTS+KIDS PET ISSUES

Marissa Williams

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GOOD DOG, BAD DOG

Responsible parents and dog-savvy children are the way to preventing bites

Like most dog owners, one mother of young children was horrified when their family dog bit her daughter's friend during a play visit. Their five-year-old Maltese shitzu cross, Jesse, had never shown any aggression before but the mother, who asked that her family not be identified, now found herself looking at the distinctive graze on the little girl's cheek where Jesse had snapped, but thankfully, not sunk his teeth into.

"I was mortified my dog had bitten a little girl and I thought I would have to have him put down," said the woman, who apologised profusely to the girl's mother.

Luckily, she tuned into a television program on problem dog behaviour that week which made her wonder if what Jesse needed was more training.

As the program suggested, the family started by getting firm about not allowing Jesse to bark at the front door at visitors.

No longer was he allowed to sleep on beds and the mother began teaching him to obey commands.

She also took him to the vet for a check-up and got the name of an animal behavioural expert who could help further. The family has since noticed a big improvement in Jesse's behaviour. Once an excitable and demanding dog, he has now calmed down considerably.

"It's been a turning point for him since he started knowing he is not running the household," she said.

The daughter's friend has been back and happily playing with Jesse although the mother now supervises Jesse whenever he is around children.

The family's story has a happy ending but dog bites can cause serious injury and trauma, especially to children.

And half the problem, say dog experts, is people not understanding and not teaching children how to



Puppy school rules: Puppy training at the RSPCA, Malaga. Buster and Molly introduce themselves. Picture: Michael O'Brien

behave around animals. Mistake number one is children going up to unfamiliar dogs and patting them, says WA Rangers Association president Samantha Turling.

"Teach children that not all dogs are friendly and that they should always ask the owner," advises Ms Turling.

And patting a dog on the head was never a good idea, she said, as a hand reaching out from on top could look like an aggressive gesture from the dog's point of view.

"It's one of the common reasons children get bitten," she said.

A much better way was to let the dog get to know the child, Ms Turling advised. The child should stay still and allow the dog to sniff them and if the dog indicated it was OK, then the child should stroke the dog from under the chin upwards, she said.

Dog behaviour consultant to the RSPCA and trainer Kathy Kopellis McLeod said if people learnt how to read dogs better, the incidence of dog bites could be slashed. Part of reading dog behaviour was recognising signs of a stressed animal

which might attack, she said. A dog turning its head away, averting its eyes, stiffening up, freezing, growling and raising its hackles could all be signs of it feeling threatened or stressed. "And a stressed dog might bite first and ask questions later," she explained.

Screaming and rough play, which were common for children to do, could also arouse a dog, she warned.

And contrary to popular belief, dogs did not like to be hugged. "Hugging is a human gesture — there are obviously some dogs that do enjoy that gesture and many dogs will tolerate it but not all will," she said.

Dogs were an

integral part of the family but as a dog and not a cuddly stuffed toy, she said. It was unfortunately common to hear how dogs had put up with lots of inadvertent mishandling by boisterous children before finally biting — which could have been prevented with the right parental supervision, she said.

When it came to dog bites, if it was not a case of something setting a dog off, then it usually was a case of a dog not being properly raised or trained, Ms Turling said.

That was the flipside to preventing dog bites, she said: responsible dog ownership and training.

"We have to remember that we can take the dog out of the wild but not the wild out of the dog," she said.

One of the most basic things people needed to learn about was the pack behaviour of dogs and to treat dogs accordingly.

Responsible dog owners also socialised their dogs and trained them to obey basic commands such as "sit", "stay", and "come", Mrs Kopellis McLeod advised.

"Those are all significant and important commands and it can make the difference in a life-threatening situation sometimes," she warned.

Ms Turling added that being able to control one's dog was actually a requirement under law.

This meant keeping a dog within a fenced area on your property, on a lead in a public place, making sure the dog obeyed the owner's commands and that it was not a nuisance to other people or animals, she said.

Even when off the lead in a designated exercise area, dogs should not be running up to or jumping on other animals and people.

Ms Turling said this was called "rushing" and classified as a dog attack with penalties applicable under the Dog Act.

"People think, 'Oh, my dog is just saying hello,' but if there was a group of kids and one of them ran up to me at full speed and then proceeded to clutch at my leg and then I said, 'Can you please control your kid?' would you then say, 'Oh, the child is just trying to say hello?'" Mrs Kopellis McLeod said.

Many dogs were unnecessarily put down or given away for biting and showing aggression when the real problem was that they had not been properly trained.

"It's not the dogs' fault. Dogs are just being dogs. They haven't been taught," she said.

The good news is that dog owners are becoming more responsible and that bodes well for the safety of people and children.

"There are lots of savvy dog owners out there now who are showing great care and responsibility and acting sooner rather than later," Mrs Kopellis McLeod said.

"When their visitors stop coming over to visit because of the dog, often that's what tells them they've got a problem."

The RSPCA runs dog training and pet awareness and safety programs. For more information call 9209 9323.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL

BITE FACTS

- Most dog attacks on children occur in their own home or a friend's or neighbour's home.
- Children under 12 are most at risk
- Any sort of dog can pose a risk to children and babies
- Each year, more than 100 children present at hospital for treatment from dog attacks.

SAFETY — WHAT TO TELL YOUR CHILDREN

- Never approach unfamiliar dogs. Ask permission from the dog's owner.
- Keep your hands at your sides and let the dog sniff you. If the dog appears interested, you can stroke it under the chin upwards.
- Do not disturb a dog which is eating, sleeping or caring for puppies.
- Respect a dog's protective instinct over its territory — which may include their fenced yard, the car they are sitting in or even protecting an owner.
- Stay still if the dog shows signs of being frightened or aggressive, such as growling, ears curled back, tail curled under its legs, tail raised, hackles raised or showing teeth and snarling.
- Stay calm if threatened by a dog. Avoid eye contact and back away slowly. Call for help if necessary but speak calmly without screaming.
- If knocked to the ground by a dog, roll into a ball and lie still and protect your neck and face with your hands.

RESPONSIBLE OWNERSHIP INCLUDES

- Registering your dog and keeping it under your control, either within a fenced area on your property or on a leash when in public — as required by the law.
- Training your dog to obey basic commands.
- Taking care of your dog's health and spending time with your dog.
- Supervising dogs and children at all times and keep children away from sick or convalescing dogs.
- Keeping dogs away from excitable environments like children's parties where they may become excitable or aggressive.

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136 Rokeby Road Subiaco
elaine@subiacochemists.com.au
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