



GREG SOUTHAM, THE JOURNAL, FILE

A batch of four-week-old Labrador-Golden Retriever cross puppies enjoy the easy life in their basket. Pet owners and others are often enamoured with cute puppies like these, but that doesn't mean they aren't capable of biting as a pup or when older.

When a dog chows down

Tips for you to help avoid being the unwitting victim of a dog bite

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Shortly after moving into a new house several years ago, I ventured next door to make peace with our neighbour's dog who had been barking every time I walked through my yard.

Not thinking about the situation where he was tied up, I stuck out my hand to offer him a doggy treat. Dumb move on my part. Ignoring the treat, he bit my hand.

I had just broken one of the cardinal rules that says dogs that are tied up should never be approached. Being a dog lover all my life, I hadn't thought anything about it and just assumed the dog and I would instantly become friends.

It's that type of thinking, or rather, non-thinking that creates problems between humans and dogs and is one of the reasons this week is National Dog Bite Prevention Week in Canada.

"It's to create awareness," Carol Guy of Bark Busters Edmonton said of the need for such a week. "People have to be made aware of how often dogs bite, why and what we can do about it."

There's no one reason why dogs bite and that's underscored by the reality that the majority of dog bites occur within pet owners' homes. Nearly half of those bites involve children being bitten by the family dog.

"We're the ones raising the dog, teaching it effective and ineffective behaviour," said Guy. "But we're doing things

in a human way and they're confused."

Which often leads to frustration on the part of the owners, who wonder why the animal doesn't do things exactly the way we want.

"And if we're frustrated and confused, the dog is even more frustrated and confused."

Guy said statistics in Canada are lacking but in the U.S. about 4.8 million people are bitten by dogs every year and approximately 750,000 of those require medical treatment.

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Carol Guy, Bark Busters Edmonton

"It's usually because of the situations the dog has been put in," said Guy. "We have to be aware of how dogs react to situations, we have to learn to read their body language."

Bark Busters says parents can significantly reduce the high incidence of dogs biting children by learning some basic guidelines.

Here are some safety tips for parents

- ▶ Under no circumstances should a child be left alone with a dog. That, says Guy, puts the dog in a position of authority.
- ▶ Young children should never walk or feed a dog unsupervised.

- ▶ Don't allow children to put on a dog's collar or play roughly with the dog.

- ▶ As a general rule, children should be taught not to pet a strange dog, even if the owner is present.

- ▶ Children should be kept away from dogs that are eating or sleeping or have new puppies.

- ▶ Dogs that are tied up should never be approached.

Here are some tips to follow when a dog approaches:

- ▶ Don't try to make friends with a strange dog.

- ▶ Stand still, stand tall and don't move until the dog loses interest in you. Don't try to run away.

- ▶ Allow the dog to smell you but don't put out your hand. Let the dog approach on its own terms.

- ▶ Face the dog at all times (attacks almost always come from behind) but don't make eye contact and stare.

- ▶ Back away slowly, watching the dog carefully.

- ▶ If the dog knocks you down, and ONLY if it does so, roll into a fetal position with your arms covering your head and neck and play dead. Don't fight back.

Dog body language that signals potential danger:

- ▶ Ears flattened against the head
- ▶ Tail lowered
- ▶ Backward-leaning posture
- ▶ Hackles raised on the back of the neck.

- ▶ Teeth bared or mouth shut tight.

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