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Reading Rex

Last year, in Saskatchewan, 322 people were bitten by dogs. Understand what your dog is saying – and behave accordingly – to ward off attacks.



See **BITING** Page 5

Biting the hand that feeds

Half of all Canadian children bitten by dogs

Every year, half a million Canadians – including 300,000 children – are bitten by dogs. Last year, in Saskatchewan alone, there were 322 reported cases of dog and other animal bites.

In fact, half of all children will be bitten by the age of 12, and three-quarters of these bites will be delivered by dogs known to them or their families.

“Cartoons, Disney movies and owning stuffed animals encourage children to hug and kiss dogs,” said Sally Cleland, a member of the Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association (SVMA) Council. “But dogs are not toys and they do not like hugs and kisses.”

Dogs, which have descended from wolves, fight by attacking each others’ heads and necks, said Cleland. They perceive hugs and kisses not as loving cuddles but as acts of aggression.

Some dogs may return these perceived acts of aggression with their own show of force. In a survey of 10 Canadian hospital emergency rooms, from 1980-2002 there were 43 dog bite fatalities, of which 63 per cent were children aged 10 and under.

“If a dog clamps down and locks its jaw,” said Cleland, “it’s biting with a force of 450 pounds per square inch, which is 10 times the force of the human hand. It can tear out chunks of



1



2



3

The girl in this series of photos demonstrates how to ‘be a tree’: Stop (photo 1), Fold your ‘branches,’ or arms, in front of your body (photo 2) and Look at your ‘roots,’ or feet (photo 3).

flesh, or crush an infant’s skull, or rip off your nose or ears.”

Several highly publicized cases in the province this year demonstrate that any dog, under the right circumstances, will bite.

In Cumberland House, a five-year-old boy was killed by a pack of dogs while, in Moose Jaw, a letter carrier was badly bitten as was a toddler in a

separate incident and, in Vanscoy, a jogger was attacked by two dogs. All three victims needed treatment for serious injuries.

The key to preventing dog bites, said Cleland, is education. It’s important for dog owners, parents and children to understand dog body language and to behave accordingly.

The SVMA recommends following the tenets of the *Be a Tree* program, developed by Doggone Safe, a non-profit organization dedicated to dog-bite prevention.

To “be a tree,” when approached by a dog, you need to:

- Stop;
- Fold your branches (arms) in front of your body; and,
- Look at your roots (feet).

“If you look directly in a dog’s eye, the dog interprets it as a threat. ‘Be a tree’ is interpreted by the dog as a submissive stance,” said Cleland. “We don’t want to frighten children; we want them to love and respect dogs and play safe.”

When you want to approach and pet a dog, follow the ABCs: Ask permission of the owner; Be sniffed, offering a clenched hand; and Coochie-coo under the chin, don’t pat the dog’s head.

To prevent dog bites, Cleland advises parents to never leave children alone with a dog, to teach children not to tease or cuddle a dog, to choose a pet dog with breed characteristics which fit the home and family life and to enroll the dog in obedience training.

To find out more about the Doggone Safe program’s resources for parents and children, call 1-877-350-3232 or e-mail doggonesafeinfo@doggonesafe.com.



A



B



C



D

Can you speak dog? Take the quiz and find out

Your dog is trying to tell you something, but are you listening?

Animals talk with their ears, tails and facial expressions, as well as through their posture and movements.

See if you can match the above photos with the list of captions, below, both provided by the Doggone Safe program and Jennifer Shrylock. Doggone Safe is a non-profit organization dedicated to dog bite prevention.

Answers follow.

Captions:

- 1) I am the boss – do as I say!
- 2) I am happy and relaxed.
- 3) I am very worried, please, please leave me alone.
- 4) Stay away from my toy, or else!

Answers:

1) I am the boss – do as I say! The answer is B. This dog’s highly raised tail is a warning sign. His closed mouth and forward stance show he’s ready to move forward. A dog giving these signals does not want to be petted.

2) I am happy and relaxed. The answer is C. A dog waiting to say ‘hello’ will pant happily and wag his tail enthusiastically. If he stops wagging and panting and stiffens when someone approaches him, he should be left alone. To be sure an animal wants to greet you, wait for him to come to you.

3) I am very worried, please, please leave me alone. The answer is D. The raised paw is a telltale sign that this dog is very worried. Dogs also show anxiety by yawning and licking their ‘chops.’ If your animal is displaying

these signs, leave him alone. He’s unhappy and more likely to bite, scratch and try to escape.

4) Stay away from my toy, or else! The answer is A. This dog is saying ‘stay away’ through its facial expression. An important sign of anxiety in dogs is the ‘half-moon’ eye, where part of the white of the eye is showing.

For more information, see *Lost in Translation? How to “Read” Your Companion’s Body Language*, by Joan Orr, MSc.