

# Ask the Experts

## The Dog Behaviourist

Kerry Vinson, B.A.



**Do you have any information on "fear-biting" dogs? My German Shepherd is fine with people until they turn their back on him to leave. He then does two quick bites, not breaking skin but leaving huge bruises.**

From the minimal information included with your question, I would have to say that fear aggression may not be the problem. Please keep in mind that canine aggression is a complex, multi-factorial phenomenon that can be due to more than one motivating cause.

Generally speaking, dogs that engage in fear biting do not go out of their way to pursue people and attack them. An accurate diagnosis can only be made by thoroughly analyzing a dog's behavioural history and by correctly interpreting their body language during an aggressive incident.

That being said, it sounds as if your dog is trying to be assertive by attempting to control the environment around him and regulate the behaviour of the people in it. Over the years I have treated many dogs who have tried to control a situation as you have described, and they have tended to be more dominant than fearful. I would need to know much more information about your dog's behaviour in other circumstances before I would be able to say if he fits into this profile.

It is crucial to obtain an accurate diagnosis for a behaviour problem like aggression before proceeding with a treatment plan. I do want to stress to you that you can have a major problem with a large dog like a German Shepherd that has shown any signs of aggression. The scenario that you have described could become much more serious in the future if the intensity of your dog's bite increases, which it probably will. I suggest you talk this situation over immediately with your veterinarian and obtain a referral to a qualified behaviourist in your area who has experience dealing with canine aggression.

For additional information on dog bite prevention, I have come across an excellent website, [www.doggonesafe.com](http://www.doggonesafe.com), which you may want to visit. Although much of the content of this website is geared to dogs and children, the same principles of preventing dog bites are applicable to adults. Also, there is an article that I wrote a few years ago entitled "Understanding Canine Aggression" which may be helpful for you to read. This article can be accessed through the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies website, [www.cfhs.ca](http://www.cfhs.ca). Click on "Animal Info: Cats and Dogs", then "Dog Bite Prevention".

As I'm sure you are aware, since the internet is totally unregulated anyone can say whatever they want, and there is certainly some bad advice out there on dog aggression. That's why it is important to get valid information on this subject from recognized organizations like the two that I

have mentioned. I hope that you will be able to address your dog's behaviour as soon as possible.

*Kerry Vinson has a B.A. in Psychology and has studied animal learning and behaviour modification. He holds a certificate in canine behaviour from Cornell University and has completed courses in canine behaviour at Kansas State. He has written numerous articles for veterinary publications and gives lectures and seminars at colleges. He has been designated an Expert Witness on canine behaviour by the province of Ontario. Please forward any questions to Kerry Vinson at Animal Behaviour Consultants E: [kvinson@consultant.com](mailto:kvinson@consultant.com), or to Canadian Association Publishers, P.O. Box 90510, 230 Markham Rd., Scarborough, ON., M1J 3N7. Fax: 416-955-1391. E: [info@capmagazines.ca](mailto:info@capmagazines.ca).*

## The Cat Doctor

Dr. Kim Drysdale, DVM



**My cat goes outside and I'm worried about her getting fleas. I've looked into the many brands of flea collars, shampoos, powders and topical treatments. Are there any differences between these and which ones are safest?**

This time of year is when we see most of our flea related problems with dogs and cats. Skin irritation leading to severe Flea Allergy Dermatitis is commonly seen. Fleas are capable of carrying and spreading tapeworms and a blood parasite called *Hemobartonella felis*. All of these are reason enough to take flea prevention seriously. Absolutely do not apply any product to your cat that is labeled "for dogs only" or has a warning like "not for use on cats". In fact, many feline medicine specialists advise against applying those products to your dog if your cat will be in contact with him/her. Cats are sensitive creatures and it is well documented in toxicology and poisoning textbooks that they are exquisitely sensitive to the products containing pyrethrens and permethrins, carbamates, and organophosphates. These ingredients are contained within most of the flea products that are available over the counter at pet stores and department stores. Signs of toxicity include depression, increased salivation, muscle tremors, vomiting, staggering, rapid breathing, hypothermia or increased body temperature. Deaths do happen as the cat can start having seizures and controlling them can be difficult. Liver failure is also a possibility. There is no antidote for pyrethrin or permethrin toxicity; however, atropine may reduce the clinical signs. Atropine is the antidote for carbamate and organophosphate toxicity.

Thankfully, there are now safer products available that avoid the above mentioned chemicals. They still have to be used with the pet's age, weight and health status in mind, so I recommend that you visit your veterinarian for an accurate weight on your