

# Ask the Experts

## The Dog Behaviourist

Kerry Vinson, B.A.

**Our dog recently bit a visitor to our home. I contacted a dog trainer for some advice and was told that once a dog bites someone it will inevitably bite again. Do you think this is true?**



In order to give a good answer to your question I would need to know a lot more information. For example, what kind of dog do you have, how old is it, if it's a male has it been neutered, what were the circumstances surrounding the biting incident, etc. I don't think I would want to make a general statement saying that once a dog bites it will always continue to do so.

Indeed, I have worked with many dogs (and their owners) who have bitten someone, and in the majority of cases these dogs do not bite anyone else. Of these several hundred cases, the success rate is in the vicinity of approximately 80 percent. My criteria for success are that

- a) the dog doesn't bite anyone else,
- b) their aggressive behaviour is brought under control, and
- c) the dog isn't euthanized because of its behaviour.

Canine aggression is a complex, multi-factorial problem that requires specific knowledge to correct. Some dogs may need to be in a household where there are no young children, whereas other dogs may be able to be desensitized through behaviour modification to almost any situation. For difficult cases, it may be necessary to employ certain medications to affect brain neurochemistry, as some types of canine aggression are thought to be influenced by low serotonin levels. Regardless, the sooner this problem is addressed, the better the chances are that it can be corrected.

Prognosticating factors in most cases involve the degree of aggression exhibited, the commitment level of the owner(s) to keeping the dog, and the extent of their effort to consistently implement the prescribed treatment program. Unfortunately, there are some dogs that may have reached the "point of no return" and their behaviour cannot be brought under control. Fortunately these dogs are in the minority if all other factors are equal.

As I said earlier, I don't like to make blanket statements when it comes to dog behaviour, but I'll go ahead and make one anyway. If a dog has only been involved in a single biting incident, the chances are that future occurrences can be prevented; on the other hand, if there has been a pattern of biting incidents over a period of time the prognosis becomes less favourable. That's why it's important to seek qualified help at the first sign of any aggression in your pet. Bear in mind that the dog behaviour business in Ontario, and to my

knowledge in the rest of Canada, is completely unregulated. Therefore, anyone can say or do anything they want, no matter how counterproductive or even harmful it may be.

So, I recommend that anyone experiencing a potentially serious behaviour problem with their dog (like aggression) should contact their veterinarian for advice and a referral to a qualified practitioner in their area. This should be done with expediency since one thing is relatively certain: once it has surfaced, the phenomenon of canine aggression will not go away on its own without appropriate intervention.

*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

**I have two eight-year-old Siamese cats. About two months ago they both started vomiting several times a week. I think they are both healthy, why would they suddenly start doing this?**



Both of your cats are senior pets, being over the age of seven years. This could be a very simple problem such as recurrent hairball issues, in which case a hairball remedy cat food may resolve the problem. However, it could also be a fairly complicated medical problem. Many Siamese and Cornish Rex cats seem to get dental diseases such as periodontal disease, gingivitis and dental tartar fairly early in life. I would recommend having a veterinarian examine both cats to determine their oral and health status and perform routine wellness bloodwork to rule out any medical conditions first. Fecal examinations should be done to rule out parasitism. If everything is normal, then vomiting of unknown origin can be difficult to diagnose without further tests. Abdominal x-rays and biopsies of the stomach and/or intestines to rule out conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease, bacterial overgrowth or cancer would be helpful in reaching a diagnosis.

Some pets develop food allergies or dietary intolerances. These cats may respond well to a diet change to a hypoallergenic food. This is a food with new ingredients that the cat