



© Bistockphoto.com

# The **TEETH** of the **MATTER**

by Kerry Vinson, B.A.

**O**n more than one occasion I've heard people say that 'once a dog bites it will inevitably bite again.' It's one of those sayings that people tend to believe, because if they've heard it often enough, it starts to sound true. The real question is, how true is it? As I'm not aware of any science- or fact-based research that either confirms or refutes this belief, I can only offer you my opinion as to its validity.

Many people ask me, 'Once a dog bites, won't it bite again?' My answer to this question is a firm 'not necessarily.' This opinion is based on the many hundreds of biting dog cases that I have dealt with over the years, and their often favourable response to behaviour modification techniques that are geared to reducing aggressive tendencies.

## Why dogs bite

Before forming an opinion of biting dogs, it's important to understand some of the reasons why they bite in the first place. First, biting is one of the most natural behaviours exhibited by members of the canid species (which includes wolves, coyotes, foxes and dogs). The survival of the species in the wild is dependent on their ability to use their jaws and teeth. The pet dog (*canis familiaris*), through thousands of years of domestication, has learned to reduce these natural tendencies in order to live in human society. Despite this evolution, a significant percentage of domestic dogs have bitten or have the potential to bite a human. As statistics on dog bites in Canada are not well kept, it's hard to get an accurate reading as to the extent of the problem. I suspect the

majority of bites go unreported, as unless someone seeks formal medical treatment there usually isn't any record of an incident. However, the number-one behavioural reason that leads to the euthanization of dogs is aggression. In many of these cases, this drastic solution can be avoided if the owner is willing to make a serious commitment to work with the animal in question and prevent further incidences of biting. Giving such a dog to a shelter or rescue organization doesn't solve the problem, it simply passes it on to someone else.

Of course, the best way to deal with canine aggression is to prevent it from developing in the first place. This starts with instilling bite inhibition from day one, teaching the dog that any aggressive behaviour is unacceptable. This is not done

“ Anyone who has a dog with a serious behaviour problem like aggression should contact their veterinarian for a referral to a qualified and experienced practitioner in their area.”

by the use of physical force but by teaching a dog to associate non-aggressive behaviour with positive reinforcement. Ample research on animal learning indicates that this approach is superior to other methods that emphasize the use of punishment as their primary focus.

### Prospects for the dog who bites

In any case, what's the prognosis for dogs and their owners in the event there is an actual biting incident? The answer to this question depends on a number of factors, such as the age and size of the dog, the extent of the bite, the environment in which the dog lives, and the degree of commitment the owner(s) have for working with the dog, among others.

These last two factors are important considerations. Some dogs are not suitable for environments with young children, especially if they haven't previously been socialized to kids. And, of course, it's critically important that the owners of a dog that has bitten become committed to implementing the appropriate behaviour modification program in a consistent fashion.

If all of these factors are equal, then the prospects for success are reasonably good. Success in such cases can be defined by the dog never biting anyone again, and it not having to be euthanized due to its previous behaviour. It's relevant to be aware that 'success' may only be possible in some cases by imposing restrictions on certain dogs, like always being in control of them in potentially problematic situations.

As I've mentioned, I am personally aware of many hundreds of cases that can be classified as successful, thereby saving the lives of the dogs involved. A general statement could be made that if there has only been a single biting incident, the prospects for success are quite good, but if there is a history of such incidents over a long period of time then the prognosis becomes less favourable. Therefore, it's important for dog owners to recognize the



© Bigstockphoto.com

early signs that they may have a problem and address the situation as soon as possible, as early intervention is the key to a favourable outcome.

As the initial signs of a developing aggression problem are often subtle, owners can overlook these or rationalize that their dog will grow out of this kind of behaviour as it gets older. Unfortunately this is often not the case, as when some dogs learn that they can manipulate interactions with people by displays of aggression, they will incorporate this into their behaviour repertoire. What may seem like a minor transgression can progress to a more serious occurrence in the future. Dog owners should realize that it is never acceptable for their dog to attempt to bite a member of their family or for that matter anyone else.

On a personal note, I've had many German Shepherds over the years and have endeavored to teach them non-aggressive behaviour. However, one female I acquired as an adult had already developed some very aggressive guarding tendencies, the extent of which I didn't realize until a few days after I had brought her to my home. Working with this dog over time, I have taught her to be totally responsive to a command to cease her guarding tendencies and accept visitors on the property in a friendly manner. In fact, her demeanor has improved so much that she has appeared on several television shows as an example of a well-behaved guarding breed dog.

### Seek reliable help

Finally, a word of caution for anyone who owns a dog with a propensity for biting. In Ontario, and for that matter the rest of Canada, the dog behaviour business is a completely unregulated field with no accepted standards. Anyone can say or do anything they want, no matter how unsound or counterproductive it may be, and there are many examples of tragic consequences that have resulted from the use of inappropriate methods. With this in mind, I would recommend that anyone who has a dog with a serious behaviour problem like aggression should contact their veterinarian for a referral to a qualified and experienced practitioner in their area. Since veterinarians are professionals who have mandated standards to which they must adhere, you are much more likely to get good information from them on the subject of dog behavioural problems than if you look in the yellow pages or on the Internet for someone to help you in this area. 🐾



Photo courtesy Kerry Vinson

The author poses with his four German Shepherds, Borris, Trixie, Eddie and Nick. Trixie has worked through her aggressive guarding tendencies.

*Kerry Vinson, founder of Animal Behaviour Consultants, has a BA in Psychology and has extensively studied animal learning and behaviour modification. He has completed courses in canine behaviour at Cornell University and Kansas State University and has been designated an Expert Witness in the area of canine aggression by the Province of Ontario. He has written numerous articles for both veterinary publications and popular magazines. For more information, contact him at (800) 754-3920 or (905) 344-7973.*