

OCCUPATIONAL DOG BITE SAFETY

Tips for Preventing Dog Bites in the Workplace

By Mitzi Robinson

Approximately 4.5 million Americans are bitten by dogs every year. Of those bitten, about 850,000 seek medical treatment, and still more go unreported. It is estimated that in this year alone, about 100 fatalities will occur resulting from both single-dog and pack attacks (CDC, 2003).

It is crucial for workers to learn how to protect themselves around dogs, as existing guidelines from institutions often fall short. This article shares tips and techniques to use when encountering dangerous dogs.

With more than 30 years of experience training field employees, the author believes that even if companies do not train employees, they should seriously consider adopting affordable e-learning options for their protection so that they are prepared and less vulnerable if they encounter an aggressive dog.

Many people possess surprisingly little knowledge about dog behavior. This lack of knowledge, especially when

coupled with dog owners who make excuses or do not ensure appropriate behavior from their dogs, can make for alarming situations.

The author has noticed a trend in academic research to increasingly align canine behavior with human behavior. However, much of this research focuses on dog breeds such as golden retrievers and beagles, rather than those bred for work or ones that may be more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior. It is a mistake to generalize all dogs without examining aggressive behaviors.

After decades of experience working with dogs and their handlers, the author has found that dogs do not

possess complex personalities and seem to be driven by instinct instead of logic. Most dogs exhibit submissive behavior within a social hierarchy, which enables them to coexist without conflict. Kindness alone does not guarantee that a dog will not bite someone; sometimes, fear can provoke a bite.

Dogs are shaped by their experiences. If a dog was previously harmed by someone in specific clothing or was provoked into aggression toward a particular demographic, then that dog may be more likely to react negatively in similar situations. Ask field employees how often they encounter dogs displaying aggression that they had not observed in previous interactions with them. In such a situation, it is possible that the dog has had a negative experience between visits that is now impacting their behavior.

It is essential for workers to understand that it is not about the dog breed, but rather about each individual dog's dominant drives. A golden retriever with strong defense and predatory instincts as well as a high pain tolerance could pose just as much of a danger as a pit bull displaying similar drives. Conversely, a pit bull with strong social drives and low defensive or predatory drives can make an exceptional family companion. The widespread issues we face with dogs in society stem from treating them as if they have human personalities rather than assessing them based on their instincts. This misguided perception leads to mauling and fatality incidents, even among those considered dog experts.

The U.S. is falling behind in truly understanding canine behavior. Workers must be vigilant and aware of their surroundings when working in the field, such as in client homes or on jobsites. A dog could suddenly appear from beneath a car, behind nearby

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR OCCUPATIONAL DOG BITE SAFETY

- Train employees on canine behavior.** Provide practical training on how to recognize and respond to dog aggression. Ensure that workers understand canine instinctual drives (e.g., defense, prey, social).

- Use a protective barrier.** Equip workers with an object they can place between themselves and a dog in the event of an attack. Train workers on how to use objects such as a jacket, umbrella or clipboard as a barrier if needed.

- Recognize behavior over breed.** Emphasize the importance of assessing and responding to dogs based on individual behavior rather than breed stereotypes.

- Be alert in unpredictable environments.** Ensure that workers know to be vigilant when in uncontrolled or unfamiliar environments.

- Respond to sudden aggression with strategy.** Workers should have a plan if for what to do if they encounter an aggressive dog. For example, identify potential safe places they can escape to such as a vehicle or objects they can use as a protective barrier.

- Use heightened caution during weekends and holidays.** Increased family presence can trigger protective behavior in dogs.

Vantage Point

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bushes, or through a partially open garage door. It is important for workers to be prepared to protect themselves if necessary and to know how to react if they encounter a dog with no barrier separating them.

Dogs may bite the first object they encounter. Always have something to place between the person and an attacking dog. Potential objects could include a laptop computer, sweater, coat, umbrella, lawn chair or stick. If the dog bites the object being used as a barrier, the person should hold on to it. If the object is dropped, the dog may then focus on the person. Once the dog grabs the item, it may pull back in a tug-of-war manner. The person should steer the dog toward a destination that offers protection, such as a vehicle or gate. Once the person reaches the vehicle, gate or other safe location and has established a safe barrier, they can let go of the object.

During weekends and holidays, the risk of dog attacks from family

pets increases significantly. If workers are visiting customer homes during these times, exercise extra caution. It is possible that with a higher number of family members present, a dog's sense of security will be heightened. Remember that dogs are pack animals.

Many workers encounter this danger daily and, unfortunately, far too many respond inappropriately, which can result in bites or worse. Training workers to interact safely with dogs can be both simple and cost-effective. Understanding the realities of dog behavior and the risks associated with dog attacks is about preparation and awareness. With millions of bites occurring annually and fatalities on the rise, workers and employers should take proactive steps to mitigate these dangers. Proper training, situational awareness and the right protective strategies can significantly reduce the risk of injury. For field employees, knowing how to react in a dangerous

encounter could mean the difference between safety and serious harm. **PSJ**

References

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