

## **Dogs, Kids, Biting**

by Jeanne Thomas, CPDT

*This article is an adaptation of a note I wrote to a Lowchen mailing group, in a discussion about whether pet Lowchen that bite children should be immediately euthanized.*

As an obedience instructor, I have talked with quite a few families who called me in after their dog snapped at or bit a child. On deeper investigation, the situation is often a case of dog owners who did not know how to train their dogs and young children to do well together and who did not supervise their interactions. The puppy didn't feel safe, and the children didn't know how to play with the dog or teach the puppy to trust them.

One family I visited was distressed that their 6 pound shih-tzu mix puppy would try to hide from four young children when they chased it around the house and that the pup would growl and snap when the children grabbed and hugged it. They were smart to call in help before a bite happened, and before the dog learned to fear children all the time.

More dangerous snapping and biting reports that I've heard come from families who had used punishment - usually yelling, shaking and leash corrections - to teach their dogs NOT to growl when distressed or afraid. Their dogs had decided that their best recourse to keep the kids at a safe distance was to bite "without warning" rather than to be punished for trying to communicate their fear and distress.

In order to decide whether a dog can be safely rehabilitated or should be euthanized, a careful analysis of the behavior of the dogs and humans and the damage inflicted by the bite is essential. Working with an experienced dog trainer or animal behaviorist to get the bigger picture can be a big help for the families who are debating the fate of their loved pet.

IF the family catches the problem at an early stage, before a dangerous bite has occurred, and if the adults are committed to working to change their dog's behavior, my prescription is to have the adults

- Verify with their vet that there are no physical health problem with the dog;
- Actively train their dogs in basic manners and tricks using positive reward based techniques;
- Put their dogs on a Say Please program, where the dogs work (perform obedience behaviors or tricks) for all their treats, meals, playtime, petting and other pleasures;
- Learn about dog body and vocal language, so they can see when their dog is feeling calm and secure or feeling stressed and worried and respond appropriately;
- Structure their household so that the dog does not spend time with children without active adult supervision and intervention;
- Give their dogs regular exercise & play, with adult as well as children participating;
- Give the kids some dog-free zones and give the dog some kid-free zones;
- Actively teach the dog that children are good things using gradual desensitization techniques (see Nicole Wilde's book *Helping Your Fearful Dog* or Ali Brown's *Scaredy Dog*);
- Teach their children how to move and interact with the dog with calm empathy and respect;
- Teach their children some specific safe training games and tricks to teach and play with the dog.

If an owner cannot or will not change their own behavior and household patterns, then I think rehoming the dog is often the best move, as long as there is full disclosure and the new owner is ready to take on the challenge: it's not just a question of finding a home without children! The new owner must be committed to working with the dog to change that pattern of behavior, and must be willing to manage and supervise the dog's exposure to children in order to prevent future incidents.

Preventing a biting problem is usually much easier and much more fun, especially during the important first weeks that breeders have to handle puppies before they go home to their buyers. New resources such as the book *Another Piece of the Puzzle-Puppy Development*, by Pat Hastings & Erin Ann Rouse, can make sure you are using best practices in getting your puppies ready to face the world.

Since even families WITHOUT children need to childproof their puppies! If dog breeders want to do more to ensure good futures for dogs you place as pets, I have some additional resources for you:

Start with Coleen Pelar's website <http://livingwithkidsanddogs.com> and her book *Living With Kids and Dogs Without Losing Your Mind*. Coleen's materials are very very helpful for adults who need to understand what both dogs and children are capable of learning and how they can play safely together at different stages of development.

[Http://www.dogstardaily.com](http://www.dogstardaily.com) is also an excellent website for new dog owners, with solid info (and free downloadable ebooks and handouts by training expert Ian Dunbar) on puppy socialization, bite inhibition and basic training.

An award winning resource you could make part of your new puppy buyer kit is the *Ultimate Puppy Tool Kit*, an excellent and easy to use guide for families to get puppy raising off on the right foot; see <http://www.urbanpuppy.com>.

I also recommend giving your pet dog buyers some training contacts before they take one of your dogs home. One way you can find good trainers all over the USA is through the Association of Pet Dog trainers: <http://www.apdt.com>. In Canada, visit <http://www.cappdt.ca>; in the UK, visit <http://www.apdt.co.uk> <<http://www.apdt.co.uk/>.

In the US, breeders can also encourage their pet dog buyers to train their dogs to the AKC's Canine Good Citizen level and to get involved with AKC Rally obedience. Canadian breeders can connect their pet dog owners to the CKC's Canine Good Neighbor program and Rally obedience. These are very accessible ways for family dog owners to set training goals and build a working relationship with their dogs. In my opinion, there's no better way to show off your companion breed to the public than to have them participating in dog-centered, training-centered sports. Help your puppies and buyers get off on the right foot, encourage them to train and play and you'll make sure that dogs from your kennel will be safe and happy companions.