

## Avoiding Canine Facials

In my business as a dog behavior specialist, it is typical to see the same issue with different clients in a short span of time. This summer that issue has been dogs biting or snapping at people's faces. All were directed at their owners or children who live in the home. The people often seem dumbfounded as to what would cause their wonderful dog to do this, especially when directed to the people they seem to love the most. The owners report the dogs did the behavior "all of a sudden" or "out of the blue."

What happens to cause a dog to go from loyal, lovable pet to a crazed Cujo? Usually the dogs were surprised when a person suddenly entered their personal space. In some of my recent cases it was accidental, like when a child tripped and fell on the dog. In two other

situations, adults hugged their sleeping dogs. Other clients put their hand in the dog's food bowl while the dog was eating, to see if the dogs would be okay with it. In all cases the dogs had been in the homes for many years. The owners recognized their dogs were uncomfortable around certain people and described them as being shy or sensitive.

Shyness or sensitivity can be a result of several factors. One factor may be that the dogs have had negative experiences in the past that frightened them. They stay a little on edge thinking it could happen again. Another factor is when dogs are under-socialized. They simply haven't had enough positive experiences with a variety of people.

There's an old saying, "Let sleeping dogs lie." There's a perfectly good reason for this; even the best natured dog can be startled when unexpectedly awakened. In the cases I worked with where adults were bitten in the face by their dogs, the owners reported they had bent over and hugged their sleeping dogs. They explained they embraced the dogs because they just looked so cute. Unfortunately, the dogs startled awake and purely by reflex lashed out in fear and self defense. The owners said the dogs seemed to feel bad about it immediately afterward.

Dogs who aren't familiar with small children may find them stressful to be around. When new babies come into homes dogs will often be fine until the children become mobile. Once dogs have issues with crawling babies or a walking or running toddlers it can be tough to fix. It's not that dogs can't be helped, but you can't expect young children to follow instructions about what they need to do to improve the relationships. For example, they can't be expected to not cry or squeal around dogs, fall down near dogs, crawl on dogs, or pull dogs' fur, ears, or tails.

If dogs are only a little nervous around children they will often move away during stressful moments and keep a comfortable distance. As long as these dogs choose to stay

### the Canine Coach

by Valerie Broadway



away, adults may be able to manage interactions until the children are old enough to follow instructions and respect the dog's space. However, when dogs have become openly hostile towards the young children, I usually recommend rehoming the dogs. It is not worth the risk that a child may end up with severe injuries and the dog may face possibility of being euthanized.

Dogs don't see children in the same way they see adults. Dogs usually feel they are above children in the social hierarchy. This may manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as holding a child's arm in their mouth when trying to direct them where they want them to go. Sometimes when children are running around and being loud dogs try to rein them in by herding or blocking them. Dogs who are uncomfortable with the level of chaos and may snap at an ankle or in the air as a threat, with no intention of biting anyone. They are simply saying, "Calm down." Unfortunately, the child may zig instead of zag, like the dog expected, resulting in teeth to skin contact. It may be a nip or it may break the skin. In either case it can be traumatic for everyone involved.

When larger dogs are surprised or frightened by a child their snap or bite the will happen to be right at the child's face level. Children under the age of 5 years are bitten in the face more than any other age group. Another situation when children are bitten in the face is when they try to hug or kiss dogs. This is especially true when dogs don't know them very well.

Dogs who like hugs will lean into the person and relax. Dogs who don't enjoy hugs will get stiff and might try to pull away. They

may show stress signals such as licking their upper lips, or yawning. The whites of their eyes may be prominent as they look sideways out of concern. It may be a surprise to hear that most dogs don't like to be hugged.

Another time to be respectful around dogs is when they are eating or have a special treat, chew, toy, or bone. Even with dogs who might be fine with someone being near their food it may be a different story when they have something they feel has a higher value. It's important to give dogs space when they are eating or chewing on something. When children are near and dogs who appear to be concerned about food or items they have it might be a good time to close them in a crate or place them outside to be alone with their food or other items. Don't allow anyone to tease dogs as if they are going to take items from them, as this will only make things worse.

In my opinion the top dog safety rules are as follows:

1. Dogs should never be left unsupervised around children or with adults who aren't comfortable with or able to handle them.
2. Don't assume dogs will be okay in every situation or with every person they encounter. Have the dog's back and manage the situations they are placed in.
3. Respect dogs' personal space.

In our society most dogs are considered valued members of the family and they love any type of attention they receive. However, it is important to be aware when dogs are put in situations that cause them to be uncomfortable. It's too high of a price to pay, for both humans and dogs, if things go wrong especially when they are face-to-face.

Valerie Broadway, the Canine Coach, is a dog trainer and behavioral specialist. For more information, call 919-542-4726 or visit [www.caninecoachingservices.com](http://www.caninecoachingservices.com).

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