

TRAUMHOF

Article series:

*My Dog Bit Someone...Now What??
Dealing with the aftermath, & a plan for
the future
by Karen Priest*

Jill is an attorney who understands the liability issues resulting from a dog biting a person with more clarity than the average owner.

In an effort to be responsible for her dog, Jill has enrolled the dog in 5 consecutive sets of Obedience classes, socialized him, made sure he is properly exercised, and has made sure he completed and passed the Canine Good Citizen test.

Her dog, "Julius" is a sweet boy, who would never so much as ruffle a hair or, twitch to curl a lip, or consider a growl at his family. He is a model pet; housebroken, trained, affectionate, and he loves to play with the family's other dog. Everyone who knows him agrees he is a wonderful dog.

But, last week, Julius bit someone!

The days that followed were excruciating for his family, as they wondered if he would be declared a "dangerous" dog, if they would lose homeowners insurance, if the person who had been bitten would let the incident go. What would this incident mean for Julius' future?

What happened? Jill heard the doorbell buzz, indicating that her Take-out Food delivery had arrived. She told her dog to "Stay" in his place, as she usually did when she answered the door. Always before, he had obeyed, so Jill didn't look back to see if he had remained where he had been asked to stay.

She opened the door and reached to hand the Delivery girl money. The Delivery girl reached to hand over the food... and then, her face rippled with fear. The dog had come happily to the door, and darted onto the landing, checking out what was going on. Jill was startled to see him there, but he was not showing signs of aggression. He never even barked. Jill reached to grab him and haul him back inside, starting to apologize for surprising the delivery girl. In the very same instant as Jill realized the dog was present,

and the dog realized a new person was at the door, the Delivery girl dropped the food bag, hoisted her hands up high, screamed, and turned to flee.

THIS the dog was suspicious of. Startled, Julius leaped up and nipped the delivery girl in her retreating rear end.

Jill was aghast! She quickly corralled the dog and tried to soothe the hysterical Delivery girl, who by now, had a nice bruise, but thankfully, no puncture wound.

Jill was apologetic and upset all at once. Her mind reeled. How could she have let this happen? How had she managed to let the dog loose? Why hadn't she crated him? Why hadn't she gone outside and shut the door behind her while retrieving her food? She felt terrible guilt, as well as horrific fear about what would happen next.

Jill exchanged phone numbers with the Delivery girl, and apologized repeatedly as the girl retreated to her vehicle.

Later, the Delivery girl phoned. She said she needed proof of the dog's rabies vaccination to provide the clinic that had seen her. Even though there was no puncture, she had gone to a clinic to be checked. She had incurred a bill of a couple hundred dollars, which Jill dutifully offered to pay. Jill also provided the rabies vaccine information.

Hospitals and clinics are mandated reporters. This means that when they see a patient with a dog bite, they must report it. Some Doctors only consider a bite reportable if it broke skin; others report bruising as well.

Jill held her breath as she awaited a call from animal control, telling her that her dog must be quarantined for 10 days. (States vary in their laws regarding the aftermath of a bite.) Would the dog be under "house arrest" quarantined to her home for 10 days? Or would he be seized and do his sentence at animal control? Jill was distraught. Her dog had never been in a kennel. If he had to stay at animal control's kennel, how would he react? Would he be fearful and thus aggressive/defensive? Would animal control label him dangerous?

Jill realized she needed to get control of herself and her situation, and she took some proactive steps.

*She made an appointment to neuter her dog. (Previously kept in tact because he had been showing at conformation shows.) Some dangerous dog edicts require neutering intact dogs after a bite.

*She hired a trainer to come evaluate her dog and discuss some more training options for her dog.

* She bought a soft muzzle & decided to muzzle her dog when delivery people were due, unless he was crated. She further decided to muzzle him when he walked in her neighborhood; just in case a similarly unexpected reaction might provoke him to bite in the future.

* She fenced her back yard.

Jill blamed herself for the incident and felt she had compromised her dog's safety, as well as the delivery girl's. She had always prided herself on being a responsible owner, and this incident had shaken her confidence. She vowed to do everything possible to prevent Julius from biting anyone in the future.

How Do Bites Happen?

Jill's story is one of many possible scenarios where a dog could potentially bite a person.

Dogs bite because they are feeling any of these things: insecure, fearful, anxious, protective, territorial, in imminent danger. Many dogs have never shown themselves to be "aggressive" in the past, and so it comes as a surprise to their owners when they bite someone. Dog bites can also be accidental results of exuberant play. My dog once inflicted a wound to my husband's hand when leaping to grab a ball. Another dog accidentally nipped a visitor's fingers when snatching a toy to tug.

Some common instances where bites occur:

- The dog is in a fenced yard. An unknown person enters the yard (- fill in your choice: pool maintenance person, lawn care service, pest control, neighbor borrowing something,) and the dog charges, hackles up like a porcupine, barking madly, and bites the person.
- The dog is loose when your dinner guests arrive. He greets them friendly, but nips when: (Take your choice) someone stares at him and reaches to pet his head/ draws their arms up protectively, freezes and looks afraid/ leans to hug you/leaves the group to go to the Bathroom/ grabs one of his toys/ walks over his bed while he is napping.

- Children or teens are fighting/wrestling; the dog intervenes to "save" the person he is protecting.
- The dog is on a leash, out for a walk with you. Your neighbor's kid, who knows the dog, skateboards over to say hello. He arrives on the noisy board quite quickly, and before you can say " Fido fears skateboards", your dog has leaped up and nipped the child's leg.
- Out for a walk on leash, a stranger leans to pet your dog, without asking permission. Your dog snaps at him.
- Leaving the pet store/dog class, a family comes up enthusiastic to meet Fido, one of them gets very close to him and sticks a hand out. Fido snaps.
- Houseguests approach the dog's food dish/bed/toys. The dog growls or gives a warning bite.
- The dog is in your car. A passerby sticks his fingers in your half open window or the dog's crate. (Yes, people ARE that stupid!) The dog bites his fingers.
- Your dog is secured behind a baby gate. Your guests approach the gate when you are not looking. The dog leaps up, barking or growling and snaps at the guest.
- The dog is at daycare or at a kennel. He is nervous. A dog fight begins. Kennel employee/daycare employee tried to break up the fight. Your dog bites kennel employee.

There are so many ways a dog can bite a person, it is impossible to list them all.

What Can I do to Prevent Future Bites?

One way to prevent bites is to start out on the right foot - socialize your puppy, train your puppy, exercise your puppy, and think ahead. Make sure you don't put your dog in a situation where he might make a decision to bite.

Another important ingredient in the recipe for safety: LISTEN to your dog. Has your dog been telling you, in dog language, that he is uncomfortable about guests, strangers, or skateboards, or bicycles? You owe it to your dog to think ahead and plan situations carefully.

If your dog is not 100% accepting of those you let inside your home, you should not let Fido go to the door when you bring guests or delivery people inside. You should secure him behind a gate, in a crate, or have him muzzled.

Introductions, if they will be done, can be done after everyone settles in. You might bring your dog in on a leash, have him do a down stay near you, and let him be around the guests, but under leash restraint. You might have guests offer him cookies, while they are seated and not staring at him. You might muzzle him while your company is present.

The muzzle can also be useful on a walk, when people are less predictable and can hurry over before you get a chance to tell them how to greet (or not greet) your dog.

It is also important for you to minimize situations where your dog can react before you can stop him. Leaving Fido loose in your unfenced front yard is not a good idea. Leaving him on a long line that can reach passing skaters or delivery people is not a good idea.

Where Can I learn More about Dog Bites/Bite Prevention?

Preventing dog bites:

http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/dog_care/stay_dog_bite_free/preventing_dog_bites.html

Dogs & Newborns:

<http://www.doggonessafe.com/baby%20coming.htm>

Avoiding Dog Bites:

http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/dog_care/stay_dog_bite_free/avoiding_dog_bites.html