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BITE INHIBITION

Bite inhibition is a concept that, as a dog owner, you've known about, but you'll probably pay it little attention unless and until your dog bites. Most dogs are inhibited from biting. That's what makes them desirable companions.

A few people seem not to mind living with an animal that might inflict serious injury on them. They buy lions, tigers, wolves, and dogs that are likely to bite, often and hard. They probably also like bungee jumping and parachuting. While these all have a large element of risk to the individual who likes living on the edge, only the first presents a hazard to others.

Inherited Component

Bite inhibition begins before birth, since it is partly inherited. Unless you are a telepath, you have really no way of knowing how quickly a dog might reach its flash point. It may have a good reason for biting, but, again, unless you're telepathic, you'll also never know when and why it is triggered to bite.

When a bite occurs, the family's first impulse is to find a good reason for their dog's behavior. Most people love their dogs deeply and feel hurt, guilty, defensive, and protective when it transgresses. "He was protecting his owner, was abused by the former owner, was startled. . ." The list of reasons is only limited by the owners' imaginations

You will seldom be in a position to judge the accuracy of their reasoning, and if you like the dog, your regard may shade your opinion, too. Because the willingness of the dog to bite a person has a genetic component, the safest option in breeding is to select dogs that have never done so.

Simply stated: Don't use any dog for breeding if it has bitten a human.

Learning Not to Bite

While the height of the threshold at which a dog will bite may be initially determined by inheritance, it can certainly be raised or lowered by training. Puppies begin learning it from each other and from their mother.

Learning the Limits: When puppies play with each other, they engage in biting behavior. The strength with which they bite is tempered by the response of their playmates. The hurt puppy protests with a loud, high-pitched scream, and the offending puppy lets go.

Likewise, nursing puppies can bite their mother once their teeth come in. Mom reacts by moving away from the puppy, pushing it away, or, in extreme cases, by growling at the biter. She may also intervene in the puppies' play should one puppy prove too aggressive to his siblings.

In these ways, puppies learn to set limits on the force they exert when biting.

Time To Grow Up: Social interactions are very important for the developing puppy not just for bite inhibition but for learning proper doggy manners. The lessons they learn here will remain with them all their lives which is why leaving the litter together past the traditional six weeks is vital.

At six weeks, puppies are just beginning to play with each other, with toys, and with their mother and other dogs. Taking them away too early can deprive them of valuable lessons in life.

What Does This Mean To You As the Breeder ? You and the rest of your household should jump right in with the rest of the puppies, teaching them that humans are very delicate beings. You will be bitten because that's how puppies test their world. As soon as a puppy mouths you, even if he does not bite hard, you should mimic his littermates and give a high-pitched yell. The puppy should immediately let go and will probably lick a couple of times. Give him a warm "thank you," and wait for the next time. If he doesn't let go, you didn't make your point, so scream higher and louder.

Very young puppies will continue to bite, but the bites should get progressively softer until they disappear altogether. Extend your indications of discomfort to bites on your clothing as well. If you walk among the puppies in a long night-gown, scream when they bite the edges.

This technique is highly effective and will work with young dogs even more quickly than it does with puppies. All children should be taught to deal with nipping puppies and young dogs this way since they rarely have the social standing to correct the dog by indicating their disapproval.

Soft Mouths

Many Akitas have soft mouths, probably from crosses to native dogs that were retrievers. Their bites may be more like nuzzles and may never cause you pain. As adults, soft-mouthed dogs may have the same toys for years. They may never cause problems to your furniture or shoes. Don't be fooled, though. They can still inflict serious damage on people or other dogs, because when they want to bite hard, they can.

Because their bites don't hurt much, soft-mouthed dogs in a mixed litter will be

the least likely to truly learn bite inhibition. When you are working with a litter, therefore, it's very important to teach all the puppies not to bite, even the ones that hardly touch you. Otherwise, the dogs when they do bite are likely to bite as hard as they can because they never learned to temper their bites.

Hard-mouthed dogs have a slightly different jaw structure, so few Akitas have the same bite strength as a German Shepherd or Rottweiler. If your face is being bitten, however, this distinction will be of little concern to you. All bites hurt.

Is Bite Inhibition Important?

The owner of the dog may be faced with huge legal fees and damage awards to the victim. Most of these suits are covered by homeowners insurance. However, the unfortunate owner may find himself out of a policy and unable to secure a new insurer so long as the dog is present.

The impact of a dog bite extends far beyond its effect on the people involved, which can be devastating by itself. Very few people actually die as a result of dog bites, but the physical damage can be horribly disfiguring. Medical treatment can range from simple cleaning to multiple surgeries. Even worse, the bond between dogs and humans is based in part on trust, and part of that is eroded once you are bitten. If the victim is a bystander and not a dog owner, he is likely to be lost forever to any relationship with dogs and may become hostile to them. Hostility coupled with activism can sound the death knell of a breed. Does this sound extreme to you?

Strengthening Bite Inhibition

You can strengthen bite inhibition throughout the dog's life. Not letting him bite you or your clothing is the first and most important step in doing this. If you currently roughhouse by offering your arm as a target, switch to a lambs wool or rawhide toy, a towel, or a ball. Throw it or drag it for him and then let him play with it. You can pick it up (few Akitas will actually bring it back, so don't be disappointed when your dog proves to be a "getter" but not a "returner") and throw or drag it along the ground. Any time the dog tries to play-bite at you, switch him over immediately to one of these toys.

If your dog has a firmly entrenched habit, yelping may not work. As an alternative, you may firmly take your dog's muzzle off your arm or clothes if he puts his mouth on you. Hold his mouth shut, but don't try to hurt him, and with a very low, growly voice, firmly tell him, "No." Don't strike the dog or shake him. You may also be battling a dominance problem, which is covered in another section of this discussion. Trading aggression for aggression may get you into an escalating spiral that can cause the very problem you're trying to avoid!

Insist that your children and any visitors not play chase, allowing the dog to pursue them. If dogs could talk, they'd probably call this game "Chase the Prey."

Given the right set of stimuli--the right movements, the right sounds, the right smells--this can become pursuit in deadly earnest.

When you send your charges on to new home, you don't need to scare your buyers to death, but you should make them aware of appropriate behaviors. Give them a book like Carol Benjamin's *Mother Knows Best* or Turid Rugaas's *On Talking With Dogs: Calming Signals* and ask that they read it before they pick up their puppy. The expense is negligible when you consider the tragedies it can prevent