

Dr Segall's column November 2006

Pet care

by Peter Segall, DVM

When good dogs go bad—or bad dogs stay bad

Tragedy fills the newspaper headlines: “Person attacked by dog, maimed or killed”.

We see this periodically in our local paper or even on the national news. What is it all about? Do we have to put all our pet dogs to sleep because one may injure or kill a person? I received a call today from a very nice man who owns a pit bull terrier. He wanted to know if he should get rid of his dog. Yes, his dog is a pit bull, the same breed that had just killed a woman in Airmont. Our animal hospital staff had dealt with this dog many times, both with and without his owner present. We found this dog to be very sweet and never showed aggressive tendencies. I told this gentleman that we had no reason to believe that his dog was a danger to others and was no more likely than any other dog to cause harm to another person.

As a veterinarian I see my share of aggressive dogs who try to bite me during an office exam. Some are nasty from their arrival at the animal hospital, but others do not try to bite unless certain things happen. Such triggers may be picking up the feet, touching the rear end, trying to look inside the mouth, causing minor pain upon vaccination or injection, or just some perceived threat during the exam. With experience, we can get vibes that tell us to be careful while doing certain procedures or to muzzle the dog from the start. We're sometimes fooled and this can result in bite wounds because we didn't expect aggression.

Are certain breeds or types of dogs more aggressive than others? I have to admit that we do see more of these tendencies with breeds such as Chihuahua, Chow, Shar Pei, Rottweiler, Lhasa Apso, Dalmation, Sheba Inu and Akita. This is not to say that most dogs of these breeds are not sweet dogs, but a larger percentage of them are aggressive. On the other hand, I almost never see an aggressive Beagle, Standard Poodle, Labrador, Golden, Doberman, German Shepherd, Cavalier Spaniel, Pug, Bulldog, Boston Terrier and more too numerous to name.

Any dog can bite, including a dog that is normally very good, but put in a position when he is scared or hurt there may be an instinctual

protective aggression. Over breeding at one time gave us a proliferation of very aggressive cocker spaniels and German shepherds.

Why a good dog goes bad is a difficult question to answer. Cases have occurred where a dog was in pain and lashed out. In one instance, a St. Bernard had a pencil in his ear. Another was a dog with a torn nail who bit the child who attempted to help. Dogs have been known to attack a person they perceive is acting like prey, or appears to be threatening. We also see sudden rage of unknown cause. Thank God most of our pets are mild-mannered and loving and would not attempt to bite except in the most unusual circumstances.

Don't tell Oliver that biting is bad. We didn't mention cats in this article because we don't want to get Oliver's dander up. If you touch him at the wrong place for too many seconds he will bite. Sometimes if you move your toes under the covers he will nip and sometimes he'll do a love bite just because.

Annie once bit the carpenter's tush as he was perceived to be a threat—to what we don't know. She has bitten another animal but only when attacked first. Let's hope all the bites are in the past.

Get ready for the cold. Bundle up.

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