

# **To Bite or Not to Bite**

## **by C.W. Meisterfeld Ph.D.**

### **Cause – Cure - Prevention**

It's a growing menace that many dog owners have faced, yet few have examined. As the number of dogs owned and the closeness between humans and dogs has so immensely increased, dogs that bite have become a menace in our households and streets. The number of reported and unreported dog bites amounts to several millions annually. According to the Harvard Medical Health Letter, more than 44,000 facial injuries a year result from dog bites, and of these, 16,000 are severe injuries.

Unfortunately, those bearing the brunt of this dangerous trend are children. The majority of the worst, and potentially disfiguring, injuries affect children under the age of ten. Half of all facial bites to children younger than the age of four are inflicted by their own pets, and 90 percent of the children in this age group are bitten while at home and without provocation.

### **Dog Attacks on a Global Level**

Dog attacks are increasing in every country throughout the world and can no longer be blamed on Pit Bulls, Bull Terriers, Rottweilers, Staffordshire Terriers, Akitas, Doberman Pinschers or any fighting breeds, due to the fact that even Golden Retrievers, New Foundlands, and Labrador Retrievers have not only become vicious, but have caused fatalities. See Dr. Golab in Facts & Figures: Fatalities Due to Dog Attacks.

### **Looking in the Wrong Direction**

The human has integrated the dog into its family, not only as an equal member, but in many cases even as the privileged member. Why do our dogs respond to their much-improved, human-like living conditions with aggressiveness? Why do they bite the well-meaning hands that spoil them with special food, comfortable shelter, and the gift of an idle life?

Unfortunately, the dog literature does not dedicate much room to even pose or answer this very question. Instead, it is full of ready advice on what should be done if a dog starts biting. The essence of such quick fixes consists of scaring, physically dominating, and severely punishing the biting dog.

Examine the most typical of such "efficient cures," which are favored by the majority of dog books and training experts, even those who claim to advocate "positive" methods:

- **Fear Conditioning**, startle your dog with a Shake-Throw-Can or tie three aluminum cans together, half filled with pennies
- **Shouting and Yelling** to scare him
- **Slapping** him hard under the chin
- **Scruff Shake** picking him up and violently shaking him and unceremoniously dropping him to the floor
- **Alpha-rolling** him over onto his back and sit on his chest while holding him down by the throat with your hands
- **Hanging** him feet off the ground until he passes out and his tongue turns blue
- **Beating** him with a rubber hose or a PVC pipe
- **Alpha Puppy Testing** pin the puppy to the floor for three to five minutes if he struggles, pick him

up and shake him if he continues to struggle, he's too dominate and should be destroyed

- If these dominant training techniques do not work you are told that the dog has a genetic problem or brain damage and that it should be euthanized.

**Fact:** In my 40 years of psychological testing several thousands of aggressive dogs and ones with rage syndrome (present total 25) I have yet to find their problem was due to brain damage or genetics.

*"The most vicious form of fighting behavior is based on fear."*

*-Konrad Lorenz*

The biting behavior of a dog is a natural response to certain trigger situations. It is an effect which in most cases cannot be eradicated with punishment but only be suppressed, manifesting in another negative behavior. However, by analyzing and understanding how a dog's mind works we can isolate and eliminate the causes for biting, and thus effectively prevent it altogether.

## What causes a dog to bite?

### Survival instinct

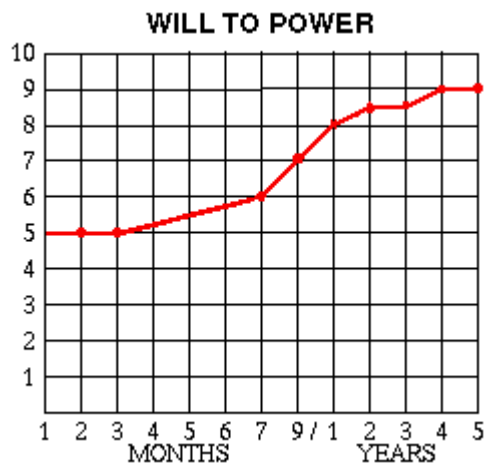
The survival instinct of a dog is being triggered by any action perceived by him as a threat or attacked, and leads to an automatic response-flight or fight. The level of a dog's assertiveness and the specific circumstances will determine the choice. In general, the dog will prefer the flight reaction. Only if he sees no chance for flight will he fight and use his teeth to defend himself.

Each time we create a threatening situation for the dog, we condition and strengthen his survival instinct, translated into his flight or fight mechanism, which is influenced by his mental and physical strength.

For this reason, **forceful, fear-inducing, painful training methods often create fear or aggressive biters** who can perceive even new, non-hazardous situations as threatening due to constant fear conditioning.

The same holds true if a dog is not trained at all. He can rely only on inherited primitive instincts, of which the survival instinct is the predominant one.

### Dominance and Will-to-Power (WTP)



Wild canines exhibit dominant behavior as a means of establishing leadership and order within their rank and file. This contributes to the survival of the fittest. It is the survival instinct that widely influences the extent of an individual's drive and potential to demonstrate dominance and authority toward his own kind and other species.

The dominance potential or assertiveness of an animal is expressed in his will-to-power, a genetic behavior trait. Canines use their teeth to determine who is the strongest and most dominant in this contest of wills.

Our domestic dogs also have this inherited behavior pattern to employ their teeth, not only to protect themselves and their offspring or their owner's property, but also to demonstrate their will-to-power toward other dogs, animals, and even people, in order to determine who will dominate.

The will-to-power of a dog grows with maturity and is quite variable. Its individual level is directly related to the physical and mental strength of a dog.

In general, until the age of about three months, the will-to-power remains fairly constant. Then the learning ability begins to accelerate, accompanied by remarkable psychological growth and changes that decisively influence the future behavior of the dog.

The will-to-power gradually increases from three to six months and grows rapidly between six and nine months. It continues to increase from nine to twelve months and then more slowly into maturity. Small breeds are considered mature at 24 months and large breeds at 36 months. The will-to-power remains relatively stable after maturity. Taking the time element of the will-to-power development into consideration, it becomes obvious why behavior problems, especially biting, can frequently be observed in seven- to twelve-month-old dogs. This is the period when they become increasingly assertive and try to establish dominance in their environment. As a natural tool, they use their teeth for this purpose.

### **Deterioration of the Will-to-Serve (WTS) due to lack of training or Alpha Dominant/Fear Methods**



Dogs developed a strong bond and a high degree of devotional attachment and loyalty toward mankind over the centuries of close coexistence. This finds its expression in their eagerness to work for us and please us, in their will-to-serve. The dog's will-to-serve became a genetic behavior imprint which is present in no other domestic animal to such an extent on an unsolicited basis.

The initial level of will-to-serve in a dog is influenced by individual differences depending on the personality of the dog. Unlike the will-to-power, the will-to-serve does not grow automatically, but is directly affected by training. Lack of training or forceful methods aimed at breaking the will-to-power can simultaneously destroy the will-to-serve. The will-to-serve can be compared with a muscle which atrophies without exercise or ruptures with improper exercise. Also, the deterioration of breed standards, neglecting desirable behavior characteristics in favor of physical factors, contributes to the overall decline of the will-to-serve in our dogs.

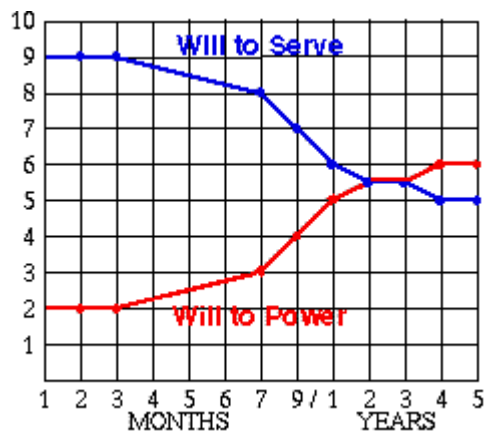
Usually after the initial phase of a nearly constant will-to-serve level that lasts until the dog reaches three months of age, the will-to-serve gradually decreases if a dog does not receive any training. Up to seven months the downward trend is moderate, whereas between seven months and two years it becomes more prominent. After an almost stagnant phase from two to three years, it lessens again until the age of four years and then maintains its level. However, the will-to-serve can decline even faster if the dog is trained with improper methods involving fear, punishment, and pain.

As a result of the steady decline, at a certain stage the will-to-serve level drops below the level of the will-to-power. A clash of the wills occurs and the will-to-power takes over. The dog starts to dominate his master rather than serve him. Instead of wanting to please, the dog demands to be pleased and only

does what he likes out of self-gratification. Feeling in charge, the dog has no respect for people anymore and will hardly obey commands. Such a dog is a potential hazard because he is unpredictable when he cannot have his way or something is not to his liking. He can be aggressive or destructive even without provocation, thus demonstrating his will-to-power.

### **Humanization: Improper relationship between owner and dog**

Our domestic dog, as a descendant of pack animals, bases his social interactions on the ranking order system, in which individuals have to know their place and role in the overall structure. In the process of domestication, man became the recognized, respected superior for the dog by providing food and shelter in exchange for work and service. To follow a human leader, to serve and please him, became an innate need for the domesticated dog.



If the dog owner is not willing to exercise this position in the pecking order (e.g., be the respected, not the physically feared, authority for the dog) and treats his dog as equal or superior, the dog is forced to take over by reason of his "pack/status" instinct.

The predominant behavior of a highly assertive, strong-willed dog will be demanding and aggressive, and his owner has to give in to the challenges and cater to the dog. However, the dog is not happy in this role which is contradictory to evolutionary and behavioral configurations. He becomes more and more frustrated and angry and will exhibit destructive, aggressive behaviors, culminating in biting. The mental overload

and adrenal overcharge find an outlet.

A dog with low assertiveness (a low will-to-power), who is not able to handle the leadership role, becomes emotionally disturbed and susceptible to physical illnesses. He may show his frustration and dissatisfaction through destructive and annoying behaviors, bark excessively, soil the house, run away, etc., and may eventually bite as well.

Such a subservient owner deprives his dog of his basic needs: a firm structure with man as the respected master in the center, the possibility of serving and pleasing him on request on a daily basis, complemented with appropriate praise and affection for good performance.

A dog owner who is not respected by his dog as his master due to inconsistency and over-permissiveness, who tries to become "top dog" by imitating canine ways of physical domination, by fear conditioning, and punishment-by-force correction, will only be able to temporarily dominate his dog as long as the dog feels weaker. However, the dog will immediately express dominant behavior toward smaller and weaker beings, such as children, and enforce his position with his teeth. Such a dog will not respect humans, but only fear them as long as they are physically stronger. Respect cannot be punished into any living being, not even into a dog.

### **Prevention of Dog Bites**

The key to preventing dogs from biting people is to teach them to control their instinctive behaviors even in trigger situations. This involves abstaining from all concepts of fear conditioning based on physical domination, punishment, and pain. Also, every dog owner should focus more on fulfilling his

dog's emotional and psychological needs by:

- a) assuming the position of the respected (not feared) master who is consistent in his interrelation with his pet, which gives the dog a sense of security;
- b) establishing territorial and behavioral boundaries for his dog and a system of communication with consistent commands and words which the dog can understand;
- c) giving the dog the opportunity of serving and pleasing and by rewarding him for his devotion with praise and affection;
- d) training the dog in a pleasant and efficient way based on the psychological concepts of mutual respect and trust.

If we structure the mind of our dogs in a positive way and support their unique, innate will-to-serve and please mankind, dogs will respect us and have no reason to bite.

**No breed is born dangerous, but the alpha dominant training is very dangerous.**

## **Facts and Figures**

### **Dog Attacks:**

"Dog attacks are the No. 1 public health problem of children, with more than half of children bitten by age 12," said Dr. John I Freeman, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

### **Fatalities Due to Dog Attacks:**

"Since 1975, dogs belonging to more than 30 breeds have been responsible for fatal attacks on people, including Dachshunds, Newfoundlands, Golden Retrievers, Yorkshire Terrier, Labrador Retrievers and even a Pomeranian," (Dr. Gail Golab, Assistant Director of the AVMA Education and Research Division)

Every year since 1990 babies have been killed in their cribs by the family dog right in the home.

### **Economic Impact:**

"Insurance companies paid an estimated \$250 million in dog bite liability claims in 1996," according to the Insurance Information Institute.

"State Farm Fire and Casualty Company paid nearly \$80 million in dog bite related claims in 1997."

"Dog attacks cost society \$1 billion annually" (AVMA).

"Reported dog attacks have increased at a rate of two percent annually, according to the Insurance Information Institute and 37 percent from 1986 to 1994 (National Center for Injury Prevention)."

### **Hospitalization:**

"As many as 1 million people annually require medical treatment for dog bites. Dog attacks send more than 334,000 people to the emergency room each year" (AVMA).

"Dog bites requiring medical attention in the United States number 500,000 to 1 million annually. Countless more bites go unreported and untreated" (AVMA).

**Innocent Dogs Exterminated:**

"Every year, 12 million dogs are destroyed due to behavioral problems. 95% of these dogs could have been saved if there was a solution" stated by Dr. Karen Overall, Director of the Behavioral Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

"A dog of any breed can become dangerous when bred or trained to be aggressive." Dr. Golab added.

"Regardless of size or breed, all dogs can bite if provoked." Randall Lockwood, vice-president of the Humane Society, states "**it is not a Rottweiler or Pit-Bull problem, but a people problem in failing to train dogs correctly.**"

**MERCK VETERINARY MANUAL**

**1998 Eight Edition**

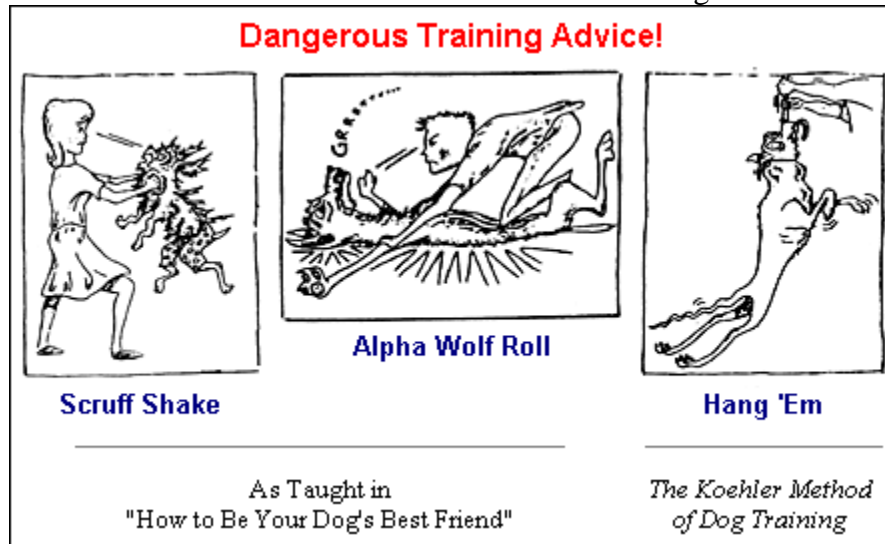
**pg. 1178 SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS**

**Treatment of Behavioral Problems Associated with Canine Aggression**

"Almost without exception, physical punishment, including the use of prong collars and electric shock collars, alpha rolls, and dominance downs can make an already aggressive dog worse. Owners should be discouraged from using these training techniques."

**Experts Experience**

"Of the thousands of aggressive dogs that I have tested, over 85% had been trained with some form of dominant/fear conditioning." *C.W. Meisterfeld*



## **BSL DEFEATED IN HISTORIC COURT RULING**

On Friday August 30, 2002, the United States Supreme Court “ruled 7-2 that there was no genetic evidence that one breed of dog was (born) more dangerous than another simply because of it breed.”

**Dog attacks will continue to increase in every country, due to the fact no government (U.S. or others) are investigating the three (3) causes and are only trying to suppress the effects. “Putting a square peg in a round hole.”**

"C.W. Meisterfeld, Ph.D. has more than 45 professional years of experience in the dog world. His philosophy of mutual respect and training without pain has earned him the Canine Distinction Award for Canine Obedience (1957) and National Retriever Championships for three consecutive years (1962, 1963, 1964) with the perfect score of 500 points in 1962. He is the pioneer of canine psychoanalysis and psychological dog training (1963). Meisterfeld has taught canine behavioral psychology in California colleges and universities. He is an AKC licensed handler (retired) and is considered to be the first canine psychoanalyst/therapist/trainer to be certified as an expert witness by the judicial system of the United States (California Superior Court, 1982). C.W. Meisterfeld is the author of six books concerning canine behavioral psychology and psychological dog training. In 1989 Meisterfeld revealed and exposed the dangers of Alpha/Wolf Dog Training and Koehler's Hang'em in his book Jelly Bean versus Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: Written for the Safety of our Children and the Welfare of our Dogs.

Excerpt from Dog & Human Behavior: Amazing Parallels • Similarities.  
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