

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Bite History and Potential for Future Aggression

What does a bite history mean?

When we say an animal has a “bite history” it generally means the animal has bitten a human or another animal and broken skin. Bites, as with anything, can range in severity and there are many ways of “grading” the severity of a bite, but one of the most common is Ian Dunbar’s Dog Bite Scale. This bite scale looks at the severity of the injury, and are outlined below.

Level 1: No skin-contact by teeth – can be exuberant obnoxious behavior or aggression.

Level 2: Skin contact made but no punctures. There may be small lacerations.

Level 3: One-four shallow punctures from a single bite and potentially small lacerations from pulling the biting dog or victim body part away.

Level 4: One-four deep punctures from a single bite and lacerations or bruising from the dog holding on or shaking.

Level 5: Multiple bite incident with more than 2 Level 4 bites.

Level 6: Victim death.

(From Dr. Ian Dunbar’s Dog Bite Scale, available on the APDT website here - <http://apdt.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ian-dunbar-dog-bite-scale.pdf>)

It is worth noting that the vast majority of bites will be Level 1 or Level 2 and severity worse than this is relatively rare. Working with dogs with Level 1 and 2 bites can yield great results and the prognosis for these cases is very good. Dogs that have bitten to Level 3 can certainly be worked with by owners or trainers but it is essential to be fully compliant and use extreme caution. Level 4 bites are where the prognosis becomes poor as these dogs lack bite inhibition and will require extensive and careful work with an experienced professional. Level 5 and 6 bites are exceptionally dangerous as dogs whose bites inflict this level of damage cannot safely be around people and welfare for dogs confined for the duration of their lives is extremely poor.

Some of the other main points animal welfare professionals focus on in the event of a bite are the location on the body, whether the animal bit and released or held/shook, etc., the relationship with the person or animal bitten, and the situation in which the bite took place. We also look for potential triggers for the bite as well as warning signals the dog may have given before biting (e.g. freeze, growl, snap, etc.). All of these factors and more play into the best ways to approach and work with these dogs to ensure handler and public safety and the next steps in training, behavior modification, and management.

What can I do?

The first thing to remember is that when a dog has already bitten in the past, you know that this is something that your pet is willing to do if pushed past their threshold in a particular way. Following closely on the heels of that, you must consider the best ways to keep the pet under threshold and manage behavior to avoid future bites. This may mean muzzling the dog when you leave the house, or avoiding certain places, people, or situations that have caused your dog to be uncomfortable in the past. The key is protecting your dog and protecting those around them. Maintaining public and personal safety are paramount to being successful with a dog with a bite history.

In some cases bites are due to over-arousal when at play or when excited, and in these cases the most important thing to remember is that you should discourage any form of teeth-to-skin contact. This means that any time your dog puts their mouth on you, you should disengage immediately and walk away. Your dog will start to associate mouthing/biting with lack of attention, teaching them that this is not an appropriate way to behave.

If you are able to identify your dog's triggers (ex. strangers entering the home, over-arousal when playing, guarding resources), you can begin to work on desensitizing your dog to these triggers. For example, if your dog has bitten a stranger when they enter your home, begin with the initial trigger; the doorbell or a knock on the door. Practice with KNOWN people ringing the bell with the door open and giving your dog high value treats. You can move forward by having the doorbell rung by the known person with the door closed and provide treats as they enter. Keep practicing with known people until you feel confident that your dog no longer reacts to the doorbell and somebody known entering the home. You can then try with a stranger, but for the first few sessions should keep your dog muzzled and potentially on leash as a precaution.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>