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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Dog Bite Prevention Week**

*By Dr. Erin Forbes, DVM  
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Dog bites pose a serious health risk to people, communities, and society as a whole. According to the Center for Disease Control, more than 800,000 people receive medical care for dog bites and over 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year. Further, over half of those bitten are children. In Vermont, 550 children were treated at the hospital for dog bite wounds between 2012-2016. That number doesn't include children who were bitten for whom medical help was not sought or needed, or where actual contact didn't occur, but unsafe interactions happened.

National Dog Bite Prevention Week is April 11<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> and it is a great time to remind both pet owners and the public that most dog bites are preventable. The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association has a fun, interactive presentation geared to elementary school-aged children to teach them how to interact safely around dogs. If you are interested in learning more about the program or about how to bring it to your local school, please contact the VVMA. Through education, Vermont veterinarians hope to keep families and pets happy and safe together! Most dog bites affecting young children occur during everyday activities and while interacting with familiar dogs. There are many things that can be done to help prevent dog bites. Dogs bite for many reasons, generally as a reaction to something.

Any dog can bite: whether they be small, large, young, old, male, or female. Even dogs that appear friendly and sweet can bite if they are provoked or startled. It is important to remember that any breed can bite as it is the dog's history and behavior that determine whether it will bite or not. To prevent dog bites, a few important steps should be taken.

These include socialization, education, responsible pet ownership, and learning to read a dog's body language.

- Socialization is a good way to help prevent your dog from biting and teach your dog normal play skills. Further, introducing your dog to people and other animals while it is still a puppy will help it feel more comfortable in different situations as it gets older.
- Responsible pet ownership builds a solid foundation for dog bite prevention. Basics of responsible dog ownership that can help reduce the risk of dog bites include carefully selecting the dog that's right for your family, proper training, regular exercise, and neutering or spaying your pet. It is also important to use a leash in public to make sure that you can control your dog.
- Educate yourself and your children about how – or whether – to approach a dog. This includes avoiding risky situations and understanding when you should certainly not interact with a dog, such as if it is not with its owner, if it is sleeping, or if it is growling or barking.
- Reading a dog's body language also can be helpful. Just like people, dogs rely on body gestures, postures, and vocalizations to express themselves. While we cannot always read a dog's body language accurately, it can give us helpful clues as to whether a dog is feeling stressed, frightened, or threatened.
- Never punish a dog for growling. This is the dog's way of saying they feel threatened and/or are scared. If a dog is growling, give it some space and step away from the situation. When dogs are punished for growling, they may skip the growl next time and go straight for the bite.

More information on dog bite prevention and the VVMA Dog Bite Prevention Program for elementary school-aged children is available at [www.vtvets.org](http://www.vtvets.org).

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*The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) is a professional organization of 385 veterinarians dedicated to compassionate animal care and quality medicine.*