Safety Instruction for K-9 Training

Photo by AceK-9.com
Dogs are capable of inflicting serious injuries on people and other animals. They are also prone to injury when exposed to human environments they are not familiar with. The K-9 handler must be aware of the dangers of handling dogs as well as safeguard dogs from injury while dogs are being housed, cared for and trained.

**The Dog Leash**

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A simple dog leash is the handler’s best way to control the movements of a dog. Even if a dog is trained to voice commands, a leash is a safety line that allows the handler to know where the dog is at all times. When working or searching on leash, the dog also has the comfort of knowing where the handler is and what the dog’s boundaries are (the length of the leash), so often a leash can help the dog to work better. Whenever conditions hazardous to the dog exist, like nearby vehicle traffic, other animals, bystanders, etc., it is always preferable to work or move the dog on leash.

Conversely, there are some training situations where the use of a dog leash can be hazardous to the dog. When the dog is jumping, moving at high speed or working in environments where it might become entangled, the handler must take extra care to be sure the dog does not come up hard on the leash, have legs or toes entangled in the leash when moving, or become entangled in objects that might entrap the dog.

Use of a Dog Muzzle

All injured or potentially aggressive dogs should be muzzled if the handler feels the dog cannot be handled safely. Apprehension trained dogs should be muzzled for veterinarian visits. Dogs should be trained and accustomed to wearing a muzzle before it is needed. As a

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handler, you are personally responsible for your dog’s actions. If the dog must be handled or treated and you are unsure if the dog will bite someone, put a muzzle on the dog for the safety of those present. A muzzled dog minimizes stress for veterinarians and their staff. Dogs that sense stress in people around them will become stressed themselves, so a muzzle actually helps the dog and everyone involved to be more relaxed.

To teach a dog to accept a muzzle, place small treats in the muzzle so that the dog pushes its nose into the muzzle. If the muzzle is of an open type, cup your hand over the bottom of the muzzle and hold the treats in while the dog puts his nose in the muzzle. Once the dog accepts this, the handler should loosely hold the muzzle on the dog, then take it off and give the dog a treat. The amount of time the handler holds the muzzle should be increased, and more treats put into the muzzle to keep it attractive to the dog. With open muzzles, treats can be pushed through the openings. Over many repetitions, the muzzle can be fastened on the dog and left on for increasing amounts of time. Some muzzles allow the dog to drink water while wearing the muzzle.

Once on the dog, muzzles should be tested by the handler by pulling firmly on the muzzle to make sure it cannot be pulled off by the dog. Muzzles constrict the flow of air and

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can lead to overheating if the dog becomes stressed. Dogs in muzzles should not be left unattended for long periods of time.

Muzzles can be very useful in training handler aggressive dogs or in training protection work. If a muzzle is not available, leashes or strips of cloth can be improvised as a muzzle.

![Photo by AceK-9.com](image)

**Dog Fights**

Ideally, fights between dogs are prevented by the handlers restraining, controlling, socializing and training their K-9s. Since fights do happen, handlers need to know how to break them up. If two dogs are determined to fight, it will be very hard for one person to break up the fight alone without special equipment.

Sometimes, if the fight is not too serious, just approaching and shouting commands at the dogs in a loud, firm and low pitched voice will break the dogs up. Use commands the dogs know and understand, and make the words short and distinct. Remain calm and authoritative because yelling hysterically will only make the fight worse. Excited humans make excited dogs.

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The noisier the fight is with growling and vocalizations, generally the less serious it is. Often dogs will display aggression but not back it up with a great deal of physical biting. In these cases, the best approach might be to stand back and shout commands rather than try to intercede. If the handlers stay cool and walk away and call the dogs, often the dogs will squabble, back off and then go with their handlers.

If available, sometimes a high pressure hose or large container of water directed on the dogs will stop the fight. Air horns can work extremely well in stopping aggression. High intensity cattle prods sometimes work also. With determined, tough dogs, electric collars will usually only escalate the fight, so they should not be used. Methods that inflict pain often only escalate the fight as pain increases aggression. Techniques that restrain or startle the dogs are the most effective. A pair of fighting dogs can sometimes be dragged to a door and the door closed on the two to break them up. Once the fight breaks up, the handlers need to be ready to control or command the dogs to stop them from re-engaging.

If no door or other means of separating the dogs exists, handlers can grab the hind legs of the dogs and pick the legs off the ground. Often dogs will release when this is done. The person holding the hind legs then has to keep turning to the side to keep the dog off balance so the dog will not gain leverage and bite the person holding the dog. NEVER reach into the head or neck areas of two fighting dogs as this will usually result in a serious bite. If the dogs have leashes, the dogs’ leashes can be used to try to pull the dogs apart and then restrain them, or to drag them to a door so the door can be closed on them to try to separate them.

Dogs often perceive the presence of their owners or handlers as support in a fight. As a last resort, the owner or handler can run away or leave and hope the dog follows. If dogs are off lead and squaring off, the handler rushing in will usually precipitate a fight. If the handler leaves, often his dog will break off from the confrontation and follow.

The best prevention is to see the precursors to the fight (direct eye contact, stiff body language) and give verbal commands or corrections to stop the fight before it happens. All police K-9s should be properly socialized and trained to work around other dogs and animals. Be constantly aware of and keep adequate distance from other dogs. Handlers should restrain their dogs in any context where fighting or safety might be an issue. Always walk a dog on the opposite side of the handler from the other dog and monitor each dog closely.

**K-9 Warning Signs: Preludes to Aggression**

1. **Fixed Gaze or Targeting** – Dogs normally do not look at anything with an unblinking or unwavering stare for more than a second. If they fix on something for more than a half second, they are targeting it as prey or as a threat. Dogs that are being “polite” do not maintain eye contact with other dogs.
2. Rigid, stiff posture
3. Raised tail
4. Raised hackles
5. Bared teeth
6. Growling, Snarling, etc., high pitch represents fear and stress, low pitch represents threat.
7. Dogs always telegraph what they are going to do – be alert to their communications.

**Handling Uncontrolled Aggression**

If a dog starts to show aggression towards you in a context where you cannot control it, stand still and remain calm. Stop any training or movement or action that may have precipitated the aggression. Do not advance on the dog in any way. Remain or at least appear calm and confident. Avoid direct eye contact. Do not speak, but use body language to communicate. Turn sideways to the dog. If retreat is warranted, retreat slowly. Do not turn your back on an aggressive dog. If the aggression is precipitated by some correction, sometimes you can quickly change the dog’s mood by pretending to play or throwing a toy or food.

![Photo by AceK-9.com](Image)

Dogs will often make a great deal of threatening noise and action without biting if they are aggressing in defense. If a person can remain calm, the noise may be the only action the dog takes. Dogs will often bump or grab but not bite at first if acting in defense or dominance. If the person escalates the fight, the dog will also.

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HOW **NOT** TO GREET A DOG

Most people do this stuff and it stresses dogs out so they **BITE**!
I don’t care how cute you (or your kid) think Boogie is. Please show him some respect.

1. **DON’T** Lean over the dog & stick your hand in his face
2. **DON’T** Lean over the dog & stick your hand on top of his head
3. **DON’T** Grab or Hug him
4. **DON’T** Stare him in the eye (This is an adversarial gesture)
5. **DON’T** Squeal or shout in his face
6. **DON’T** Grab his head and kiss it (This is an invasion of space)

Doing this to a dog who doesn’t know you is like a perfect stranger giving you a great big hug and kiss in an elevator. Wouldn’t that creep you out? And wouldn’t you have the right to defend yourself?

THE CORRECT WAY:

- No Eye contact
- Let the dog approach you in his own time
- Keep either your SIDE or BACK towards the dog (non-threatening posture)
- Pet or stroke him on the SIDE of his face or body. Or on his back.

If a dog becomes aggressive and the handler has the dog on lead, the handler may be able to suspend the dog away from him so that the dog cannot reach the handler, or the leash can be looped or secured to something and the handler is able to move away and avoid being bitten. If a dog is bite trained and likes bite sleeves, sometimes a bite sleeve can be used to

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distract the dog. If a bite is coming and the handler cannot avoid it, a jacket or towel can be wrapped around the arm for protection, or another item (jacket or stick held like a tug) can be presented to a bite trained dog. Handling an aggressive dog will depend on the situation, however, the best situation is to be ready for the possibility and have the dog restrained or managed in some way.

![Photo by AceK-9.com](image)

**Working Dogs, Bred to Defend and Bite**

Dog from working “lines” are purposely bred to defend and apprehend. Because of this, working dogs have a lower “bite threshold.” This means it takes much less to stimulate them to bite than some other breeds. They may bite out of defense or fear, but they also bite out of “prey” drive when something moves quick or makes noises like a prey animal. Good breeding helps to breed dogs that don’t bite indiscriminately, and proper upbringing and socialization of puppies and young dogs teaches them what is acceptable in human society. Each dog is an also an individual, and no amount of care in breeding will guarantee that every dog bred has good temperament and upbringing because puppies vary in each litter.

If a working dog handler has not personally raised their dog from a puppy, they won’t know exactly what that dog’s past has been. This is especially true in Europe where most working dogs stay in an outside kennel and never see the inside of a building. There may be no guarantee that the dog was raised around and accustomed to children. Dogs can treat children like other humans, or other dogs (meaning they may try to discipline children who don’t “behave” according to dog standards), or even more distressing, if not accustomed to

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children at all, their prey drive may be triggered by children who move quickly and or make loud or high pitched noises. Children and adults have been killed by dogs. Dogs may kill by mauling or something as simple as knocking a child to the ground where the child hits its head and has a brain injury. **Working dogs (or any dog) should never be left loose or unsupervised around children, physically or mentally impaired people or strangers.** Often it is not the dog that misbehaves, but the children, but the dog will be blamed for the bite, and **the potential consequences are not worth any amount of risk. Bitten children often mean the end of a K9 program and the end of the dog.**

For a sobering news story, see [http://wabi.tv/2017/03/02/update-dog-attacks-fairfield-officers-infant/](http://wabi.tv/2017/03/02/update-dog-attacks-fairfield-officers-infant/)

**IF THE SITUATION IS SUCH THAT YOU WOULD NOT LEAVE YOUR COCKED AND LOADED DUTY WEAPON UNHOLSTERED IN THE AREA, THEN YOUR DOG SHOULD NOT BE LEFT IN THE AREA UNSUPERVISED OR UNRESTRAINED.** Having a working dog is like having a new child, except that you can lock the dog in a kennel for reasonable periods of time. They are a 24/7 commitment to care and supervision.

**Transportation and Containment Safety**

When dogs are in a kennel, vehicle or crate, handlers have to provide climate control for the dog. Dogs control their body temperature by curling up or stretching out. They need to stretch out to cool themselves. The dog must be contained in a crate or container that is large enough for the dog to stretch out and stand up. Bedding or padding for insulation needs to be supplied in cold weather.

Vehicles are especially prone to overheating. K-9 vehicles should be outfitted with extra ventilation and dog friendly containers. A heat alarm and extra ventilation fans are standard in most K-9 vehicles.

![Photo by AceK-9.com](Photo by AceK-9.com)
Dog “containers” need to be inspected for sharp edges, including food bowl brackets, bails on pails, hooks, fencing, etc. Dogs can catch themselves or their collars on protruding items.

Generally, for safety, the dog’s collars should be removed when they are kenneled for a longer period of time. Wiring and wall need to be monitored for chewing or other damage by the dog.

Photo by AceK-9.com

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Kennels need secure latches with a locking device, roofing and means to prevent the
dog from digging out or trying to push under items. Dogs can climb wire or jump to the top.
Remember that dogs that are kenneled for long periods of time may apply all their time and
energy into trying to get out.

Dogs that are exercised and active regularly and introduced to kennels or containers in
a positive manner rarely attempt to escape. When introducing a new kennel or containment,
spend time in or around it with the dog. Don’t just lock the dog in and walk away. Dogs are
social animals and need to be part of the pack. Play with the dog in the kennel, provide food
and other treats. Accustom the dog to the containment gradually.

Dogs being transported in vehicles should be in a crate or other containment. If they are
not contained, they should be supervised and accompanied by their handler.

The handler should review the kenneled arrangements and procedures with their
jurisdictions and employers. Dogs may be kenneled at the handler’s home or in a kennel
building. Each agency or jurisdiction will have its own policies and procedures. An experienced
trainer should go over each handler’s dog housing arrangements. See SWGDOG SC4 –
KENNELING AND HEALTHCARE at www.swgdog.org for more detailed information on
kennels and kenneling.

Dogs that are kept in a kennel environment are dependent on people for everything.
Handlers have to make sure they provide the following:
   a. Cool and clean water at all times, or water given on a regular basis.
   b. Food

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c. Exercise and activities  
d. Cleaning  
e. Regular monitoring  
f. Adequate rest  

Please return to the course. Once you review the extra resources in this module, take the quiz.