

An Aggressive, Storm-Scared Dog

Dog becomes aggressive and afraid during storms after surviving Hurricane Katrina.

By September Morn

Q. We adopted a Hurricane Katrina survivor dog, a neutered male 3-to-5-year-old Bichon Frise. He becomes terrified and aggressive during storms. He bit me pretty severely recently when I tried to coax him out from under a bed. We have worked through some other issues with him, but he has acclimated to life in the house and regular food, walks, and lots of love. Since he bit me, I'm worried about how he will handle my 9-year-old daughter and children who come to visit.

A. You've had some success helping your Bichon recover from his frightening experiences associated with Hurricane Katrina, but it takes time for animals (and humans) to emotionally recover from such major trauma. Nobody can know what he went through during that storm and the days or weeks before he was found and rescued. On top of that, you don't know what other kinds of scary experiences this dog had in his life before Hurricane Katrina.

When any animal is in a state of fear, his entire mindset becomes controlled by his flight-or-fight survival instinct. Your dog was obviously in that mode when he hid underneath the bed. Your hands reaching to pull him out frightened him and he bit you because he was afraid. He probably wasn't thinking about you at all; he could very well have been having a flashback to something associated with Hurricane Katrina.

In fact, because he hides under furniture when he's scared, he may very well have been hiding under a bed when rescuers broke into his home and saved him. He didn't know them and he was afraid -- their reaching hands grabbed him and dragged him from his "safe" hiding place, put him in a cage and took him to a strange place with a lot of other scared dogs.

When he bit you, he was already scared enough to be hiding under the bed. When he saw your hands reaching for him all those former scary experiences may have come flooding back. So he did what any frightened, cornered dog would do to keep from being grabbed and dragged out of his dark little sanctuary: He bit you.

In the future, if he hides from storms under the bed, just let him stay there. When the storm is over and he calms down, he'll come out. He's not doing any damage under there and it makes him feel more secure, so there's no harm in letting him stay there until he's ready to come out on his own.

Meanwhile, work on teaching him to come when you call by giving him treats, praise, and other nice rewards when he does. Practice this every day at least 10 times, at different times, so it becomes a habit for him to come immediately when you call. Teaching this by giving him rewards will help him get over any worries that he'll get in trouble if he comes to you. In time you'll be able to call him out of his hiding places and he won't be afraid to come.

If the only time he's ever bitten or tried to bite was this single incident, you probably don't need to worry about aggression with children. But, the children need to understand that if the dog hides under something, they must leave him alone and never try to pull him out. If you have the slightest suspicion that your daughter's guests might ignore that rule, keep the dog with you or put him in your bedroom when children visit. Do this to keep him and the children safe from each other.

If this bite was not an isolated incident and he's bitten or threatened to before, you should obtain the services of an experienced dog trainer or behaviorist who's had success working with fear-aggressive dogs.