

Sunday Column – It's Controversial For publication 8.12.17

The most definitive work I've read on the "pit bull" type dog is, "Pit Bull, The Battle over an American Icon", written by Bronwen Dickey and published just last year. She doesn't sugar coat her findings, nor does she indulge her reader emotionally. Instead, she lays it all out in a logical and readable format.

It still surprises me when I read or hear of anyone promoting breed specific legislation. However, when it does come up it is usually related to a tragic dog bite fatality. That is what prompted a television news editorial that ran this week, suggesting that all "pit bull" type dogs should be sterilized. At least they didn't call for them to be summarily rounded up and killed, which is a common response.

A number of reputable studies have come to the conclusion that fatal dog attacks are not attributable to breed. If it were that simple local governments and states that have enacted breed bans would now be virtually free of the problem. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In fact, some studies, including one published by the AVMA, propose that our focus on breed diverts our attention away from the real problem.

Fatal dog attacks make news. "If it bleeds, it leads" is what a journalist once told me. These attacks make news and the same story is reported repeatedly making it seem like it occurs more often than it does.

To put this in perspective, fatal dog attacks occur approximately 35 times a year. This frequency is on par with death by lightning strike. We take a far greater risk every time we get in a car.

It seems to be human nature to want to solve a problem without any effort on our part. We will first seek to change something outside of ourselves rather than change our own understanding and subsequent behavior. Unfortunately, this approach will not protect us or our loved ones from injuries incurred through a dog bite.

Thanks to a mountain of information collected over the past sixty years we know a lot about dog bite prevention starting with the fact that children are most at risk. Playing with dogs is not a ride at Disneyland. Dogs are a species apart from humans. They do not understand why we humans do the whacky things we do and we have no real way to explain ourselves so they understand. Dogs have teeth and big dogs have big jaws and big teeth that were designed to rip into flesh. They also use them to send the message, "back off" or to protect themselves when threatened. This is what they have to work with.

Bear this in mind when your seven year old is getting crazy with your best friend's fifty pound dog. One of my earliest memories is my mom teaching me how to behave around animals. Don't chase them. Don't hit them. Don't pick them up. Don't pull their tails. Don't ride them.

If I got bit or scratched she let me know it was my own fault, and I learned from the experience. Many of my contemporaries report the same experience from childhood.

By far, the most frequent dog bite victims are children between the ages of five and nine. This is especially the case with boys, who are more likely to engage in activities which excite dogs. Studies reveal that over two-thirds of dog bites are provoked; meaning most could have been prevented if the child had been taught how to conduct himself properly around animals.

“Pit bull” type dogs are not inherently dangerous. Nor are the other breeds that often get included in breed bans such as Dobermans, German Shepherds, Rottweilers, and too many others.

It is up to us to teach children how to behave around pets and never leave them unattended in play. Owners should humanely contain their dogs, especially on their own property where most bites occur. Chaining is not humane and no longer legal in many communities. It causes dogs to be defensive as it puts them at a disadvantage to potential threats.

In the end it all just boils down to common sense. Relationships with dogs enrich our lives because they so easily bond with us and teach us what it means to love unconditionally. When we care for them responsibly they add to our world.

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