

NEWSLETTER

WebParentTip, Volume 2, 10 for 7-11-01

DOG BITES ARE PREVENTABLE!

There have been some horrific dogs-attacking-children stories in the news recently.

Almost all of these attacks are preventable which is the good news. But the majority of fatal or severe dog bits occur in young children which is the bad news.

Almost all of the serious bites are inflicted on the child by a large-breed dog known to the child. In many instances the family pet is the perpetrator; in some cases the dog lives nearby.

Most of the severe bites and fatalities in one series occurred in children under five who were bitten on the head or neck

Community efforts to prevent dog bites, like leash laws, work--to a point. But parents have an important role to play here just as we have an important role to play in prevention of ALL accidents in our children.

First of all CHOOSE THE FAMILY DOG CAREFULLY. Consult with a veterinarian or animal behaviorist about which breeds should be considered to co-exist in a house with children. Do not bring home any individual dog with a prior history of aggression. Spend time with the dog you are considering--this is no time for impulse shopping. Plan to spay or neuter your pet as this reduces aggression. Because as a pediatrician I have seen many young children with terrible facial injuries I would avoid all large-breed dogs especially the ones at the "top of the aggressive list": pit bulls, rottweilers, and German shepherds. Also, although I love dogs and know how hard it is to give one up, I would put my children first and immediately get rid of a dog that has shown aggression toward a child. 19 of the 109 dogs responsible for a fatality had a prior history of aggression.

SOCIALIZE THE NEW DOG entering your household. Teach the dog submissive behaviors like rolling over and relinquishing food without growling. Do not play aggressive games like wrestling with your dog. Seek professional advice if the animal develops aggressive tendencies.

Even if you have done all this, NEVER LEAVE AN INFANT OR YOUNG CHILD ALONE WITH A DOG. Over 10% of fatal attacks involved a sleeping infant.

Parents also have a role to play in SOCIALIZING THEIR CHILDREN. We live in a world full of dogs, not every dog owner is responsible, inadvertent accidents like a fence blown down in a high wind can allow a dog to roam free, and some dogs have been abandoned and roam on their own. This means we have to teach our children DOG RULES.

- o NEVER APPROACH AN UNFAMILIAR DOG.
- o NEVER RUN FROM A DOG AND SCREAM.
- o REMAIN MOTIONLESS when an unfamiliar dog approaches (“be still like a tree”).
- o If knocked over by a dog, ROLL INTO A BALL and lie still (“be still like a log”).
- o NEVER TEASE A DOG or try to take food away.
- o Never play with a dog unless SUPERVISED by a grownup.
- o Do not disturb a dog who is SLEEPING, EATING, OR CARING FOR PUPPIES.
- o Do not pet a dog unless you have allowed it to SEE AND SNIFF YOU FIRST.
- o Do not RIDE A BIKE CLOSE TO A STRANGE DOG.
- o Report stray dogs or dogs behaving strangely to a grownup and if bitten immediately tell a grownup.

As with any potentially scary thing we teach our children we want to teach them the rules without scaring them so much they become phobic. The best way to do this is to speak matter-of-factly and explain that if kids obey the “dog rules” everybody can have fun including the dogs.