

On the Positive Side: Anatomy of a Dog Bite

J. L. Jones

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The other day the radio had a report of Pit Bull type dog running free in a neighborhood of El Paso. The dog had gotten out of its yard and was chasing kids and a little dog. A concerned citizen then tried to distract the dog and, in the process, was bitten. If this dog had been a German Shepherd, Golden Retriever, Labrador or small lap dog, the story might not have made the news. The general public hears most about pit bull incidents. However, dog rescuers hear all the misfortunes. For example, the 18 month old niece of my friend was attacked by the family's Great Dane which was raised from a puppy. The parents thought it cute for a baby to crawl on the floor with a large dog. The bartender at my local watering hole has a scar on her neck from a golden retriever attack as a child, a few inches different and she may have bled to death. These incidents never made the evening news. Let's point out that children are eye level to dogs and direct eye contact can be perceived as a threat.

There are a number of issues concerning dog bite statistics. Discrepancies include the information primarily comes from random experience, accounts are from family and friends, and cultural norms. The most pressing information is the nature of the attack. Was the dog being aggressive, was it a playful bite that got misdirected, was the dog scared or was it somewhere among all of these? Keep in mind that dog bites and deaths get confused. For example; the United Kingdom banned the American Pit Bull in the 1990's; however, a study showed that the number of dog bites stayed the same. Author Karen Delise of "Fatal Dog Attacks" discusses the circumstances surrounding dog attack fatalities and attempts to determine whether there was dog aggression, human error or a combination of factors contributing to the incidents.

We recognize that aggression is part of normal canine behavior. In the wild, dogs use forms of aggression to hunt, defend and guard their territory. A well socialized dog can show aggression but have no need to follow through. This is the result of the canine knowing and respecting the hierarchy of the pack (Woodard, 2012). It has been said that rescue and search dogs are really using their inherent predator/prey skills to affect a rescue or search.

There shouldn't be any misconceptions of this article. The concerned citizen did the right thing. My brother at four years old survived a severe dog attack. He has permanent scars on his the side of his face, head, and shoulders. Small children should never be left unattended with a dog, especially a large dog of any breed. Keep in mind that animals and people do not communicate the same way. Therefore, when a dog feels threatened or confused by a person then the canine may show its teeth, growl, or snap. We have grown used to dogs as part of the family but you cannot tell what an animal is thinking. The best way to avoid an incident with dog is for responsible owners to not let their pets be put in bad situations, safely supervise, restrain and control them, and keep them well socialized. Two good sources for more information are: <http://www.bestfriends.org/theanimals/pdfs/dogs/dogaggression.pdf> and <http://DogBiteLaw.Com>.

Guest author J.L. Jones is a HSSNM volunteer and a member of Therapaws. Interested guest authors can contact HSSNM at 575-532-8020