

It's really quite amazing. I've gone the past two weeks at work without receiving as much as a single scratch or bite from one of my patients. Of course now that I've written that down I'll probably get bit tomorrow. I'm due. Most veterinarians and those dedicated veterinary nurses and staff members that work with animal patients recognize that bodily injury is a daily possibility in our profession. We accept that, and while we do everything possible to limit our risks, we know that we may get injured from time to time; but after-all it's our choice to work with animals. Unfortunately, many people (as well as their pets) are seriously injured each year by animals (usually off leash aggressive dogs). Sadly these injuries can be very severe, even fatal. But unlike veterinary professionals these unlucky people/pets don't usually have a choice about their risk for injury. Usually they're just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Recently we've been hearing in the news about tragic attacks by dogs on innocent people. Whether it's a young woman in San Francisco or an innocent child in Richmond these horrible events serve as tragic reminders that our relationship with the canine species is not always as predictable as we might think. Veterinarians see the results of canine aggression all too often in their daily work. In these cases the victims are usually other animals. These animals, like people, can sustain severe if not mortal wounds from their chance meeting with a loose or uncontrolled dog.

Along with the news reports of these unfortunate attacks comes the inevitable questions concerning the basic safety of having dogs as family members. This is doubly tragic because as many dog lovers know, if done right, raising, caring, and sharing your life with a dog can be one of life's true pleasures.

Some cities, responding to growing concern over dog attacks, are listening more closely to proposals that would further limit "off leash" activities for dogs on public property. I enjoy watching a dog run at full speed through an open field just as much as the next guy, but I'm always concerned when I see dogs "off leash" in a public setting. The potential for problems is just too great. Keep in mind, I may be a little biased; after-all, a week or two doesn't go by at our office where we don't see a dog or cat that's been attacked by a dog that is loose or not under the control of its owner.

While I don't have a simple solution for the problem of dog attacks I do think with some forethought many of them can be prevented. Below I've listed what I think are some basic "rules" of responsible dog ownership.

- 1) Obey leash laws.

This is simple. Most cities have laws that clearly state that dogs must be on a leash while in public. These laws are intended to reduce the number of loose, roaming dogs as well as keep the law abiding pet owner in control of their dog should unexpected events occur-like coming across a loose and roaming dog. Dog owners need to obey these laws. Cities need to better educate the community about leash laws and most importantly enforce them.

- 2) Be sure you can safely confine your dog to your property.

Be sure yard fencing and gates are in good repair and adequate to confine your dog. Many times dogs get out of the backyard through unclosed or poorly functioning gates. This allows your pet to become a victim or in some cases a perpetrator of a dog attack.

- 3) Don't allow your dog to roam the neighborhood.  
If the risk for severe trauma to your pet, or the headache of a major lawsuit is not enough motivation to keep your dog confined, then at least consider the fact that your neighbors would surely appreciate not having to clean up your dog's stool from their front yard every morning.
- 4) Socialize your dog.  
This point is very important. Dogs that are well socialized to people and other dogs are less likely to exhibit aggressive behavior. Veterinary behavior specialists tell us that in dogs this socialization process is most critical between the ages of one to four months. This is when we can have the biggest impact on our dog's social skills. Take time to carefully introduce your puppy to other dogs and plenty of people. One word of caution: Puppies are susceptible to many infectious diseases. Be sure to pick your "puppy crowd" carefully, preferably choose other well-socialized, healthy, vaccinated dogs.
- 5) Consider obedience classes  
I continue to be amazed at how a little training can go a long way in helping a dog become a good canine citizen. Talk with your veterinarian about programs that he/she has seen work.
- 6) Don't encourage aggressiveness  
I really try to discourage dog owners from training their dogs to be aggressive. While it may seem "cool" to some to have an intimidating dog, an aggressive dog can be very dangerous and if nothing else a major liability. A good watchdog will simply let you know, by barking, when something is not right around your house. An aggressive dog will not bark any louder and may mistakenly attack an innocent bystander. I recommend leaving aggressiveness training to the experts-like police and military dog trainers.

In the future, as in the past, I believe dogs will continue to play a valuable and important role in the lives of people around the world. Dogs have the unique ability to teach us lessons about unconditional love, steadfast loyalty, and that the simple things in life are really the most fun. All dog owners in our city have a civic responsibility to follow the rules, and to make responsible choices regarding the care, housing, and training of our dogs.

*Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner in care of the Vallejo Times Herald, (440 Curtola Parkway, Vallejo CA. 94590) or e-mail him at rdwdvet@aol.com.*