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Thursday, 21 August 2003

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Banning breeds pointless, says dog expert

20 August 2003

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Legislation banning specific dog breeds will not save children from being attacked by dangerous dogs, says an American expert.

Martha Armstrong, senior vice-president of the Humane Society of the United States, told a workshop in Wellington yesterday that the best way to stop dog attacks was to educate owners.

She said dogs of every breed, from pit bulls to chihuahuas, were capable of attacking people if they were not trained or looked after properly, so it was pointless banning particular breeds.

Educating owners to socialise their dogs and have the dogs professionally trained was the best way to significantly reduce dog attacks.

Ms Armstrong was speaking to a workshop on companion animals, organised by such groups as the Kennel Club and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Much of the debate at the workshop was about the Local Government Law Reform (No 2) Bill introduced to Parliament after several horrific dog attacks on children, including the mauling of seven-year-old Carolina Anderson in a park in Auckland last February.

The bill would ban the further import of American pit bull terriers, Brazilian filas, Japanese tozas and dogo Argentinos, as well as allowing local councils to order any breed to be muzzled in public.

It would also force dog owners to fence sections to allow people access to a door without meeting a dog, and sharply increase fines and jail terms able to be imposed on owners whose dogs attack people.

Ms Armstrong said that attempts to ban specific breeds had failed in the US and elsewhere because even dog experts could

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not agree if a cross-breed had come from a proscribed breed.

She said politicians jumped on bandwagons to promote such laws to soothe public concern, but knee-jerk reactions did not solve the problem.

Many dogs that bit people, especially children, were not naturally aggressive but bit because a child tried, for example, to pull the dog's bowl away while it was eating.

Other dogs were dangerous and aggressive but that was because they were chained up all day and had little socialisation with other dogs or people. But education for dog owners could deal with that.

"Not all pit bulls are fighting, aggressive dogs. Not all aggressive dogs are pit bulls. Banning a breed gives a false sense of security to a community."

Dog control authorities needed to conduct detailed surveys of the pattern of attacks in their areas and devise careful, well-financed plans to cope. What worked best in one city did not necessarily work best somewhere else.

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