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Large dogs can turn deadly

Editorial / Opinion
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Seven-year-old Connor Lourens' life ended suddenly, and no doubt, horribly.

He had gone to his neighbor's house in Lunenburg on Feb. 4, and then the unthinkable happened.

The neighbor's giant, 140-pound English mastiff attacked and killed the 7-year-old, according to police.

The dog apparently attacked Connor in the doorway of its owners' home, police have said.

Animal control officers put the dog down.

But for now at least, that's where the accountability ends.

Police said they are not aware of any laws that could lead to the prosecution of the dog's owners.

Clearly, however, something is amiss.

The dog that killed the 7-year-old weighed 140 pounds.

That's as large as some adult males.

A human would have understood that a 7-year-old child doesn't pose a major threat.

But the dog apparently could not.

Opinion is split in the veterinary community regarding the demeanor of mastiffs.

Nicholas Dodman, professor of animal behavior at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, said that mastiffs can be prone to violent behavior.

"They are not for a novice owner," he said Monday of the breed. "They are a massive dog, so if things do go wrong, they go very wrong."

Dr. B.J. Meunier of Townsend Veterinary Hospital disagreed.

"I can tell you that English mastiffs are some of the gentlest, kindest dogs that I see in my practice," he said. "In general, if you hear a problem with them and children it's usually due to their size, such as knocking children over by mistake."

It's important to note that the boy's parents don't blame the dog's owners for their son's death.

But we think clearly some consideration should be given to ensuring these tragedies don't happen again, if not by punishing owners, then making the rules for keeping such pets more stringent.

State Rep. Emile Goguen, D-Fitchburg, said basically the same thing earlier this week.

"Certain types of dogs should be (kept) in a big cage, so a little kid can't get in," he said.

Chapter 140, section 156 of the Massachusetts General Laws allows a person to kill a dog if it wanders away from its owner or property and attacks someone.

But the state stops short of establishing regulations, fees or other penalties, leaving it up to cities and towns.

We think that's a mistake.

It is rare in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for a dog to attack and kill a person.

But dog bites are not rare.

And clearly when people own dogs that weigh more than 80 pounds -- and allow them to be around children -- they have created a potentially dangerous situation, which can turn deadly very quickly.

It puzzles us in this day and age why anyone should need a 140-pound dog.

The crux of the matter is that this boy should not have died.

Other parents should not have to go through what his parents are going through now.

And children and adults shouldn't have to worry about being attacked by a dog, even if the attacks are rare.

We urge lawmakers to consider legislation banning the ownership of larger or aggressive dogs -- or at the very least, passing laws that clearly detail how they should be caged or controlled.

A 140-pound dog may be a pet, but it can also be a dangerous and deadly wild animal.

And despite what dog owners might say, a human being can not predict how an animal will react in every situation.

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