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Dog euthanized after attack on 5-year-old at Palo Alto school playground

By Connie Skipitares
Mercury News

A 3-year-old Australian shepherd mix dog was euthanized by Palo Alto animal control authorities today, 11 days after attacking a five-year-old boy at the Hoover Elementary School playground.

Sean Martin, a kindergartener at Barron Park Elementary School, sustained a fractured vertebrae, gashes, scrapes and puncture wounds in the Dec. 2 attack. He received eight surgical staples on the back of his neck. He returned to school this week.

Sean was with a small group of children playing outside on the lawn at the school while a Cub Scout event attended by his father and 12-year-old brother was taking place in a nearby school room.

The owner of the dog -- a 40-pound female shepherd -- took the canine and a second larger dog off leash in a gated kindergarten play area. The dogs got loose and the shepherd mix charged toward the boys. The other dog did not go on the attack.

Sean was knocked down by the animal and lay face down as the dog bit him several times on his neck. "The dog's jaws were deep in my son's neck and he was shaking him," said Sean's dad, Greg Martin.

The other boys kicked the dog until he released Sean. He was taken to Stanford Medical Center and treated and released the same day. The owner, whose name was not released, was cited. The owner agreed to having the dog euthanized.

Palo Alto Animal Services Superintendent Sandi Stadler called the attack rare. Most dog bite cases that are reported involve dogs biting their owners or someone else in the household, she said.

"It could have been a lot worse," she said of the attack that was over in a matter of seconds. "I can definitely say that if the animals were on leash this wouldn't have happened. Many pet owners underestimate what their pets are capable of."

"The saddest thing about this whole incident is now we have several little children afraid of dogs," she added. "It's frustrating because most dogs are loving pets."

It is illegal to let dogs off leash in public places, except for designated dog parks. Those who violate the law can be cited and fined \$100 per incident.

"It's just irresponsible for any dog to be off-leash," said Greg Martin. "That's the main message I'd like to get out to the community."

Contact Connie Skipitares at cskipitares@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5647.

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