

Dog attack at Dennis event leaves boy, 9, seriously hurt

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SOUTH DENNIS - A 200-pound dog attacked a 9-year-old boy at a benefit Sunday for homeless animals, injuring the child so badly he may never regain full function of one hand.



■Nine-year-old Bradley Fowler was injured after he was attacked by a dog. (Staff photo by KEVIN MINGORA)

The English mastiff's jaws crushed and tore open Bradley Fowler's left hand after the child walked behind him during the Paws in the Park event at Johnny Kelley Park.

When the Brewster fourth-grader tried to push the mastiff off with his right hand, his mother said, the "pony-size dog" bit that, too.

"He can't write, he can't eat, he can't even go to the bathroom on his own," Bradley's mother, Jayne Fowler, said of her son, whose hands are immobilized in plastic braces.

The attack was the second violent incident to mar a dog-related event in Dennis in less than a month. A service dog attacked and killed a Yorkshire terrier at the Pooches on Parade dog show in September.

The 22-month-old mastiff has harmed children before.

Its owner, Paul Iafrate of Orleans, said when his son was 9 he needed stitches after the dog snapped its head quickly and caught the child in the lip with a tooth.

His son liked to tease the dog, Iafrate said, and the dog likely reacted that way because he thought the boy was trying to take away his toy.

Iafrate said a similar incident happened involving his daughter and the dog, named Winston. He declined to offer details.

He characterized both incidents as the dog's defensive reaction to being teased or startled.

"They weren't attacks," he said. "I know some people assume that once a dog has bitten, it's an attack."

Cheryl Malone, animal control officer in Dennis, said she and her Orleans counterpart would investigate the incidents at Iafrate's home as they look into Sunday's attack.

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Malone said they would have to finish the investigation before determining whether the owner will face any charges for Sunday's attack.

"I have to find out if the situation would warrant a criminal charge," she said. "At this point it doesn't look like anything criminal was done."

Owners are required to report all dog bites, said Duane Boucher, animal control officer in Orleans. Boucher said he had checked records and found no reports about Winston.

Iafrate said that when he explained to hospital personnel how his son got his lip wound he thought it would be automatically reported. He said he did not report the incident involving his daughter.

A 4-inch gash

Billed as "a dog walk and a day of fun to help homeless animals," Paws in the Park is an annual event organized by the Animal Rescue League of Boston's Cape Cod branch.

Several local and regional members of the organization who were at Sunday's event could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Iafrate said he brought his son to enjoy a Sunday afternoon in the park, and the dog-loving Fowler family was there to do the same.

Bradley was on his way to grab a doggie treat from a nearby table to feed to another dog when he brushed past the brindle mastiff.

The dog growled. Bradley, who stood eye-to-eye with the huge animal, stepped back and put up his hand.

"All of a sudden he started pulling directly behind me," said Iafrate, who at that moment was talking to a rescue specialist from the Animal Rescue League.

"Because of my position I couldn't control him at that point," he said. "The next thing I know he had the boy's hands in his mouth."

Iafrate said the dog, who was on a leash and had all his shots up to date, released Bradley when he pulled him back.

The child, covered in blood from his shirt to his sneakers, ran toward the center of the field screaming for his mother.

"I looked at the hand and thought he had caught it in a piece of machinery," said his father, Ken Fowler, who had been standing not far away.

"It looked like a couple of fingers were missing."

Bradley was rushed to the hospital. The dog had opened a gash between his left thumb and index finger that ran some 4 inches long and more than an inch wide, exposing the bone.

Ligaments in his left hand were torn. He had at least 11 puncture holes in the two hands combined, his mother said.

Winston in quarantine

Bradley, who is right-handed, will likely require surgery to close the wound, plus months of physical therapy.

He may not regain complete function in his left hand, the specialist at Children's Hospital Boston told his parents.

A Dennis animal control officer at the event ordered that Winston be quarantined for 10 days at home, standard procedure in the wake of an animal bite.

Asked if he had considered putting the animal to sleep, Iafrate said no.

"He's a family pet," he said. "He's a very good dog except in this one incident. It makes him look like a horrible beast."

He said Winston sometimes gets nervous when people approach him from the rear, and that's probably what provoked the attack.

"I believe once he growled the boy put his hands up as he was backing up, and (Winston) may have thought he was going to hit him," Iafrate said.

"It just happened so quick that I couldn't stop it," he said, adding that he felt horrible for the family.

Yesterday, Bradley sat in a leather easy chair in his family's Satucket Road home in Brewster, each arm propped up on a pillow.

For now, he's confined to the house. He can't attend school, or play kickball, or go to his "stunt man" gymnastics class.

"I'm in pain," he said.

But he doesn't seem to hold it against the dog. Next to Bradley was a stuffed pug they gave him at Children's Hospital. He named it Winston.

And he's grateful to the little girl who gave him a little green bottle of bubbles on Sunday, sometime after he was attacked but before he was rushed to the hospital.

He doesn't know who she was, his parents said, but he wants to thank her.