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# Statistics on 'dog-bite pandemic' lack teeth

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Newsday

December 3, 2005

Swimming pools and skateboards. Drapery cords and marbles. And don't forget the proverbial lightning bolt.

All are statistically more likely to kill you or your child than the average dog is, according to the provocatively titled *Dogs Bite, but Slippers and Balloons Are More Dangerous* (James & Kenneth Publishers, \$14.95).

Author Janis Bradley, an instructor at the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers, says the book evolved from her own cognitive dissonance. Although she was familiar with the chill-up-your-back statistics that suggest a veritable dog-bite pandemic -- including a 1994 federal Centers for Disease Control study that extrapolated that 4.7 million Americans, almost 2 percent of us, are bitten by dogs every year -- they just didn't square with her reality.

"Even though I was a dog person, I didn't know people who had been seriously injured by dogs," says Bradley, who started examining the research.

What she found was that of the bites recorded in the CDC survey, "the vast majority had no injuries," she says. Another study that analyzed hospital visits found "the severity for a typical bite injury was significantly less than of a fall."

To understand why the conventional wisdom is so out of whack with the actual risk, some Jungian analysis might be in order.

"Dog bites fit into pretty much all the categories that lead people to have an exaggerated fear of things," Bradley says. "We're more neurologically hard-wired to be afraid of predators with big teeth than, say, big machines on wheels that go 80 mph." Fearing a hound dog more than a Honda "made sense in the environment in which our brain evolved," Bradley says.

All this said, dogs do bite. But Bradley cautions that legislation banning certain breeds is not the answer. "In England, they've had breed-specific laws for a long time, and the only study I've been able to put my hands on has shown no change in the rate of dog bites." And because of the plasticity of dog genetics -- and the relative ease with which aggression can be bred for -- banning one breed just leads to another one taking its place in a few years.

*Denise Flaim is a staff writer at Newsday, a Tribune Publishing newspaper.*



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