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# Health

## Most dog bites aren't serious and can be avoided

### Sensational cases draw headlines, but canine aggression is preventable with a little common sense

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By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When dogs bite and maul, the headlines can be huge and the stories horrific. The latest attack reported around the world involves a French woman who recently underwent what is billed as the world's first partial face transplant. Surgeons grafted a nose, chin and lips onto the woman's face, which had been severely disfigured last May in an attack by a dog.



Annie O'Neill, Post-Gazette

**Aggression by this dog and others is preventable with a little common sense.**

Janis Bradley has been paying special attention to dog attack stories and statistics for years, including an oft-quoted 1994 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, which found that 4.7 million Americans are bitten by dogs each year. While media reports and word-of-mouth could seem to give the impression that dog bites and attacks are an ever-increasing problem, Ms. Bradley, a professional dog trainer for 15 years, wondered why she didn't know anyone who had been seriously injured by dogs.

A trainer at the San Francisco SPCA, Ms. Bradley did her own research and published a book with this intriguing title: "Dogs Bite But Slippers and Balloons Are More Dangerous."

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Most dog bites do not require medical care, Ms. Bradley quickly learned, and most bites treated in doctor's offices and hospitals are minor. The largest percentage of dog bite victims are children, and most victims are bitten by their own or a neighbor's dog. Fatalities are rare.

Which is not to minimize the pain or the damage inflicted when dogs do bite, said Ms. Bradley, whose book is aimed at educating the public and reducing the number of dog bites. Like virtually all trainers, she thinks most dog bites are preventable.

"There is no epidemic of dog bites," Ms. Bradley said in a telephone interview. "The population is increasing. The number of dogs is going up" with 68 million pet dogs in the United States in 2001, according to the CDC. "The number of dog bites should be going up too, but it is not."

The same trend holds true locally.

In Allegheny County, where health care providers are required by law to notify the health department of treatment given to dog bite victims, "We are holding steady at about 1,100 to 1,200 reported dog bites per year," said Dave Zazac, a department spokesman.

The number of local bites is arguably low when compared to the number of licensed dogs: 119,000 in Allegheny County in 2005. The City of Pittsburgh sells about 20,000 licenses a year, but there's no real way of knowing how many unlicensed dogs are out there, though county treasurer John Weinstein, whose office sells license for the state, estimates the number at anywhere between 30,000 and 50,000.

Because children are the most frequent victims of dog bites -- a 2001 study showed that 42 percent of dog bite victims were 14 or younger -- researchers and dog trainers stress the importance of educating the public about responsible dog ownership and proper behavior around dogs ([see accompanying story](#)).

The French woman who received the partial face transplant was bitten by her own pet dog, a Labrador retriever.

Dog bite prevention programs and public awareness campaigns are encouraged and offered by a variety of groups including the American Veterinary Medical Association, the U.S. Postal Service, the American Kennel Club, dog training clubs and by local shelters, including Animal Friends in the Strip District.

"We would like to think that educational programs are helpful" in preventing dog bites and attacks, said veteran humane officer Kathy Hecker. Shelter employees reach out to about 6,000 children per year, including school students and scout troops. Animal Friends speakers are usually accompanied by animals, as children are taught how to treat

animals humanely and with respect -- as well learning how to behave in ways that will lessen their chances of being bitten.

Animal Friends also has training sessions for people who frequently have to deal with other people's dogs, in often-trying situations: police officers, postal workers and their own shelter employees and volunteers.

"Usually we can finesse them," Ms. Hecker said of dealing with dogs that may be aggressive or frightened. "You learn how to read dogs" and figure out to work with them without being bitten.

Ms. Hecker has only been bitten once in her years as a humane officer, and that was by a tiny Chihuahua.

Reports of horrible dog maulings and attacks are frequently accompanied by public outcry. Many towns adopt or discuss adopting laws that would ban the breeds that most frequently inflict bites, such as pit bulls or Rottweilers.

Yet such laws, known as "breed specific legislation" do not meet with the approval of the CDC, the AVMA or many other groups that work with dogs, including the Humane Society of the United States.

There is "no measure to determine which breeds are more likely to bite or kill," according to a news release issued last May by the CDC during National Dog Bite Prevention Week.

Rather, the CDC suggested, existing laws should be used to target the owners of dogs that bite, regardless of their breed.

"In England they've had breed specific laws for years and it just doesn't work," Ms. Bradley said. "Studies show no change in dog bite injuries."

So-called "bad dogs" are produced by people who breed aggression into dogs and encourage "bad" behavior, she suggested. If there truly were a way to totally ban any breed, bad people would find another breed to take its place.

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