

Ban pit bulls? Let's try being responsible parents, first

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Perhaps we should consider banning or putting down knucklehead parents instead of "killer" pit bulls.

I'm admittedly writing this in a heightened state of righteous anger at news that a "family" pit bull mauled a 7-year-old boy to death Thursday in the basement of a North Minneapolis home.

The reported circumstances are not new or shocking. A dog was treated, well, like a dog - tied up in a basement, exiled there except for breeding and denied normal human bonding or interaction. It became aggressive and attacked when an opportunity arose. Go figure.

Tragedy? No doubt. Accident? No way. This dog was unwittingly but essentially programmed to inflict serious bodily harm or take a life at some point. Even some of the child's relatives related much of this after the fact.

But, of course, the knee-jerk statements of shock began as soon as the sad news broke. Local pols are again mulling new or stiffer laws to prevent another dog-related fatality - just the second in the metro area in 17 years. And the first involved a 1989 mauling of a 3-year-old girl by a "domesticated" wolf in Forest Lake Township. The surprise in that event was that the state granted a license to the owner of the beast.

Some legislators or municipalities might even resurrect the ridiculous notion of banning the pit bull breed - the canine non grata of our generation.

I like dogs, but I don't own pets and did not grow up with one. I did have a goldfish once. But it was tough trying to pet the thing. I believe all animals belong in the wild, not cooped up inside a cage, zoo or home or confined to a front or back yard. "Born Free" and all that.

Yet, dogged dog lovers Maureen Haggerty and Karen Delise fully embrace my take on this incident.

Haggerty's a St. Paul native, dog trainer and founder of Canine Coach, a firm with offices in Minneapolis and the Sainly City. She did not mince words as to where to lay blame for this child's death. They were, strikingly, the same descriptors I knew would not get past my editor.

"What happened is extremely tragic and frustrating," Haggerty said. "But you tie up a dog, even Fluffy for that matter, in a basement, tied to a chain and kept away from humans, and you will have a dangerous, aggressive dog on your hands."

New or stiffer laws, she believes, would only hamper the already law-abiding among us.

"These people don't already comply to the laws that are already on the books," she said of owners who abuse their dogs.

Haggerty believes you can train or mistreat any dog - from a poodle to a pit bull - to be aggressive. The pit bull - because of its gruff physique and legendary lockjaw bite - has been popular for decades as a guard dog and canine buffer for drug pushers and crime-weary residents of mostly poor and crime-plagued areas of the Twin Cities and the nation.

She says she invariably encounters the same phenomenon while walking or training pit bulls that belong to licensed owners in North Minneapolis.

"Almost without fail, a young man will come by, look at the dog and ask me if they can breed it," she said. "They want to do that to make the dog mean or aggressive."

Karen Delise is a Slanesville, W.Va.-based veterinarian and the author of "The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression." The book, which came out in June, includes a review of credible data dating to the 1940s.

If there's a common thread in the book on such dog-related fatalities, it is this:

"The majority of the child victims lived in a high-risk environment and were provided a low level of safety," said Delise, who is also founder of the National Canine Research Council.

According to Delise's research of government data and media reports, Thursday's attack is the first documented, fatal dog attack attributed to a pit bull in Minnesota.

In fact, according to Delise's research, Minnesota has seen four fatal dog attacks in 47 years. Three were attributed to other breeds.

Delise does not count the Forest Lake incident because it involved a wolf.

The next most recent incident occurred in 1984 and involved another 7-year-old boy, who was mauled by two roaming dogs in Minneapolis.

To put things into perspective, many more children of similar ages have died in firearm-related incidents or at the hands of their own parents than have been killed by dogs.

So, who or what should we really go after here?

"If you bring anything into the home, a swimming pool for that matter, you have the responsibility as a parent to take extra precautions, especially with children around," Delise said. "If you did not take the time to train a dog you brought into your family to be social, you already failed the dog, as well as your child."

I feel sorry for the father in Thursday's death. But I feel far sorrier for the boy, a needless casualty of parental ignorance and neglect. There is no greater punishment for a parent than losing a child and knowing you played a role in the death. But there should be societal consequences, at least to send a message to the rest of us.

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