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Life

Defining dangerous dogs can be slippery

By Amy D. Shojai
P'ETiquette

Exactly what is a dangerous dog? First, you must define "dangerous." While the vast majority of the 70 million pet dogs never cause injury to a human, they all have that potential. There is a difference between using the term "dangerous dog" in conversation and using it in a legal context. The law has very specific definitions for "dangerous dog," but it varies depending on the city, state and county where you live.

Some places say that every dog of a certain breed is a dangerous dog under their law. In the United States, there are only a few places that consider every "pit bull," for example, to be dangerous. If a dog of any breed is trained to attack people or animals or is kept as a guard dog on non-residential premises, it will also be deemed dangerous.

Most cities and states in America classify a dog as dangerous only as a result of that individual animal's actions. For example, an unprovoked attack that causes injury or behavior that poses unacceptable risk might earn the designation. A dog that "threatens" a person with loud barking may be classified as dangerous in some places, but not in others.

Describing a "dangerous dog" becomes even more slippery when one looks at what constitutes an "unprovoked" attack. What exactly would you consider a "threat" worthy of a danger label? A savvy dog owner realizes that the silent dog with lowered head, showing the whites of his eyes and stiffly wagging his tail literally shouts his warning to keep away or risk a bite. Approaching this dog provokes an attack. But a child or uninformed adult might instead



Amy D. Shojai

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Russ 2000	685.22	2.21
AMEX	1757.55	7.63
NYSE	7743.43	12.15
30 YR BOND	46.72	-0.47

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interpret the wagging as invitation to approach and consider the resulting bite “unprovoked.”

In fact, the dog can be friendly yet still defined as dangerous. Overly playful dogs that jump up on a toddler or elderly person pose a risk. Even well adjusted family pets can act with uncharacteristic aggression if caught up in the pack (mob) mentality of multiple dogs.

It would be so much easier to simply identify at-risk dogs by breed or other means and then ban them. But there is no single factor to point out this information. Dog bites and the even more rare fatal dog attacks always are a result of both the past and present events that include an array of factors. Some of these factors include the dog's genetics, learned behaviors, socialization, canine function, health and size of the animal, reproductive status, individual personality, environment, owner responsibility, victim behavior, victim size and physical condition--and popularity of the breed.

Breeds responsible for dog bite fatalities have varied over time, in direct relationship to how popular the breed was at the time. Today, the dogs that get the worst press include “pit bull” type breeds. But between 1975 and 1980, in one notable survey, the breeds most often associated with deadly attacks were the German shepherd, “husky-type” dogs, St. Bernard, bull terrier, and Great Danes.



All dogs have the potential to bite. Well-socialized, emotionally and physically healthy dogs know how to “threaten” and protect themselves without risk to themselves or others.

Let's put this in perspective. A comprehensive special report looking at dog bite and fatality statistics between 1979 and 1998 was published in JAVMA, Vol 217, No. 6, September 15, 2000. Interestingly, the information reveals that since 1975, dogs from more than 30 breeds have been responsible for fatal attacks on people, including the Labrador retriever, dachshund, and Yorkshire terrier.

‘Nuff said.


Amy D. Shojai, CABC is a nationally-known pet care specialist certified with the IAABC and author of more than a dozen pet books including, “PETiquette: Solving Behavior Problems in Your Multipet Household” and “Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover's (and Cat Lover's) Soul.” She can be

reached through her website www.shojai.com.

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