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Study: Chihuahuas most likely to bite

This country celebrates National Dog Bite Prevention Week every year in May.

During that time various organizations post helpful tips on how to protect yourself and your children from being bitten, along with a variety of graphic stories about individuals who had been attacked by dogs. Generally, we see nothing about the simple prevention methods of training and socializing dogs, or training children to interact safely with them.

For the last 20 years or so the most often selected dog bite prevention method has been to ban certain breeds or types of dogs. Anyone with any understanding of dog behavior will know that banning dogs has no effect on reducing bite incidents for the simple reason that all dogs, given the "right" set of circumstances, will bite. The only sure-fire way to prevent all dog bites is to eliminate all dogs from our society. But some are not satisfied with this method, and believe that there must be a better solution; one that solves the problem of poor communication between dogs and humans, and eliminates the risk of bites.

Since the majority of people do not want to live their lives without the company of dogs, it was deemed necessary to gather facts so that a more intelligent solution could be devised.

Colorado had instituted some of the most draconian laws that banned any dog that bore even the slightest resemblance to so-called "pit bull" types in a concerted, but failed, attempt to eliminate all dog bites. The Coalition for Living Safely With Dogs and the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association joined together to conduct a two-year study about how likely any given dog is to bite, as part of their effort to overturn breed-specific legislation already passed in some states and many cities and prevent its imposition in additional places.

Their major finding so far is that all dogs will bite, and that circumstances under which the bite occurred are more pertinent than the breed or type of dog involved. This is good news for dogs, in that the study poked big holes in the theory that bites could be prevented simply by banning certain breeds or types of dogs. It also contained bad news in that the situation was shown to require far more sophisticated and far-reaching methods than simply banning one or more dogs.

Among facts discovered or confirmed are that the breed most likely to bite a veterinarian or groomer is the Smooth-Coat Chihuahua. It also confirmed that, refuting the myth that Pit Bull dogs can perform the most severe bites, the most damaging bites were administered by Lhasa Apsos. And to prove the egalitarian nature of dogs, about 40 percent of bites were inflicted by mutts and "designer dogs," slightly more than the percentage they make up in the general dog population.

The most common factor in dog bite incidents was that the dog was running loose and unsupervised, specifically while the dog was engaged in dog-on-dog aggression, or while

exhibiting aggression protecting property, or during fear-based aggression.

So the true simple solution is not to ban certain dogs, but rather to require that no dog be allowed to roam loose.

New Hampshire has an exemplary dog control law, in that it requires all dogs to be confined on their owner's property and, when off its owner's property, to be under the direct control of an adult. This law was passed back in the early 1980s, and is a direct and major contributor to the relatively low number of bite incidents in this state, as well as to the reduction in litters of unwanted puppies.

Almost every municipality in the state has accepted this law. If yours has not, perhaps you should inquire as to why not? Most bites occur in the dog's home, and most involve aggression while the dog is protecting its property. Children are bitten more often, but much less severely, than adults.

Generally these bites occur because children are not taught how to interact with dogs, or are left alone and unsupervised with one or more dogs. Children must be taught not to attempt to remove their dog's food or toys, and not to physically abuse dogs while in play. Dogs need to be socialized and trained so that their behavior is reliable in all situations.
