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When Dogs Bite

Author and researcher Karen Delise shares her thoughts on dog bites and the media

By Micaela Myers

For more than two decades, Karen Delise has been researching dog bites and how the media reports them. She is the founder and director of research for the National Canine Research Council, and her background includes 29 years of service with the Suffolk County, N.Y.'s sheriff's office and a degree in veterinary science technology. She is the author of "Fatal Dog Attacks: The Stories Behind Statistics" and "The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression." Here, Karen speaks with StubbyDog readers about dog bites and how the media reports them.

Q: In your book "The Pit Bull Placebo," you talk about how the media tends to focus on breed rather than circumstances when a dog bite occurs. Historically, was this always the case?

A: No. Absolutely not. Historically, news accounts were keen on trying to understand cause and effect when it came to dog bites. Clearly there were instances where no one could understand why a dog attacked, and oftentimes these dogs were simply referred to as "vicious" or "savage." However, many more stories not only attempted to explain the behavior of the dog, but also intentionally or unintentionally provided the reader with dog bite prevention tips. An example of this is a 1960s news article that told of a dog that became frightened and confused when children threw a blanket over his head, and bit the first child he saw when the blanket was removed. In this instance, the readers were given enough information to understand how this human-canine interaction ended with an injury.

Q: Nowadays the focus seems to be on breed. When other breeds bite or kill, do those incidents tend to get as much press coverage as incidents where pit bulls are said to be involved?

A: With the exception of the Diane Whipple case in San Francisco in '01 [which involved Presa Canarios], I have not seen a single dog bite-related fatality attributed to another breed of dog that has generated the amount of news attention given to incidents that are reported to involve "pit bulls." There simply is no debate over this; the evidence is clear and overwhelming.

A related and disturbing phenomenon is the reporting of "pit bull attacks" in which no injury resulted. I have in my files over 100 cases where the media chose to report an encounter with a "pit bull" that had not resulted in any injury, while incidents involving other kinds of dogs that did result in serious injury received no coverage at all.



Photos courtesy of Melody McFarland



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Q: I know you investigate bite-related fatalities thoroughly. Do you find that other types of dogs are often mistakenly called pit bulls by the media (or by initial witnesses to the incident)?

A: I think most people would be shocked to learn where “breed identifications” of dogs involved in dog bite-related fatalities originate. When I started my research into these incidents more than 20 years ago, I expected that breed identifications reported in the media would be somewhat reliable and that identifications from authorities would be even more reliable. What I have learned is the media may list a dog as a certain breed without any supporting data whatsoever, oftentimes merely on the claims of a third party (neighbor) who had no knowledge of the dog or its origins.

Furthermore, I learned law enforcement authorities might also list breed without any supporting data, or merely on the belief of the owner. One of the fascinating reasons for this is that many law enforcement personnel are quick to admit they cannot identify breeds of dogs and that the primary focus of their investigation is to determine if there is any human culpability on the part of the owners and/or parents (and the breed of dog involved has no bearing on determining that culpability).

Further proof that detectives are correct in being least concerned with the breed of dog than any other aspect of the investigation is found in the studies of Dr. Victoria Voith , whose work has shown us that even animal care professionals cannot visually identify mixed breeds dogs with a reliable degree of accuracy.

Q: Could you explain the difference between a resident dog and a family dog since this comes into play as a factor in many dog bites?

A: Family dogs are dogs whose owners afford them opportunities to learn appropriate behavior and to interact with humans on a regular basis in positive and humane ways, and who give them the tools necessary to live harmoniously in our world.

Resident dogs are dogs whose owners maintain them exclusively on chains, in kennels, or in yards; and/or obtain them for negative functions (such as guarding, fighting, protection and irresponsible breeding). Because resident dogs are maintained in ways that isolate them from regular, positive human interactions, they cannot be expected to exhibit the same behavior as family dogs.

Q: It seems to me that the media often mistakenly calls dogs involved in bites “family dogs” when they are in fact resident dogs. Do you find this to be the case?

A: Yes, unfortunately this misrepresentation of the dogs involved in serious incidents as “family dogs” either misrepresents or ignores altogether the circumstances that contributed to what happened. This kind of news coverage contributes to the myth that dogs are “unpredictable” – when exactly the opposite is true. I can confidently predict that the overwhelming majority of dogs will never seriously injury anyone, and I can confidently predict that the more than 75 million dogs living in the U.S. today will never be involved in a dog bite-related fatality.

And I want point out for your readers that only a tiny percentage of the dogs that are abused and treated badly will ever be involved in encounters with humans that result in a serious or fatal injury.



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[Here's one example of seriously neglected and abandoned dogs erroneously referred to as "family dogs" in the media.]

In 2005, the media, particularly the Detroit Free Press, repeatedly referred to two dogs involved in a fatal attack as "family pets"; the implication being that the dogs turned on a family member, betraying the bond of trust that had supposedly developed between them. Not only did this imply that dogs of their reported "breed" are untrustworthy, but that on some level all dogs are unpredictable.

Not a single news story, in the Free Press or elsewhere, reported that the two dogs, which had only been owned by the family for a short time, had been abandoned in the basement of a row house when the family moved to another house two blocks away. The people had left the dogs to die in that basement. No food and no water. The dogs attempted to survive by eating the garbage in the basement, including rubber gaskets, plant material, plastic and a cardboard box of rodenticide (rat poison). When the owner's unsupervised 6-year-old daughter returned to the property to play on her old swing set, the dogs, now dying from malnutrition and the effects of rat poison, attacked her. The police, after examining the dogs, ordered a necropsy. It revealed the terrible abuse these dogs were subjected to prior to the incident.

Q: In "The Pit Bull Placebo," you also talk about some of the things that dogs who bite tend to have in common, regardless of breed, if we could discuss those factors.

A: This is where we find the important distinction between "family vs. resident" dog. The overwhelming majority of serious and fatal incidents involve resident dogs that, at the time, were not being supervised by their owners. In addition to being unsupervised at the time of the incident, resident dogs rarely interact with their owners, and more often than not, have not been afforded the opportunity to enjoy positive interactions with people and to learn appropriate behaviors.

Q: In addition to being outdoor, resident dogs, I remember reading that most dogs involved in fatalities or severe bite incidents are unaltered – i.e. not spayed or neutered. Is this true in your research?

A: While the vast majority of dogs involved in fatalities are unaltered, I do not believe this to be a causation, but instead a correlation to how a dog is kept and cared. What I have found to be significant is that owners not involved in responsible breeding programs, who have failed to spay or neuter their dogs, have often failed to meet many of their dogs' needs, such as appropriate socialization, shelter, nutrition and veterinary care. Sexual status may become a contributing factor when owners allow intact males to be aroused by being near females in estrus.





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Or, nursing females, whose owners fail to provide an adequate whelping environment, may feel the need to protect litters from other animals or people. For example, an intact male or female dog may not feel particularly threatened by an unfamiliar child coming over to pet them, but when the intact male is near a female in estrus, or the female is now nursing a litter of puppies, or when dogs are mating, the dog may perceive an unfamiliar, advancing child very differently than it would otherwise.

Q: Aside from chained dogs, most severe bites or fatalities are by loose dogs, correct?

A: Dogs that are not under the supervision or control of their owners inflict most severe bites and fatalities. Whether the dogs are chained, loose in a yard or loose off their property seems to be less important than the fact that the dogs have been left to their own devices.



Karen Delise with her dog

Q: If the media were to focus less on breed and more on circumstances in reporting bite incidents, how could this help address the problems that factor into most bites?

A: From strictly a human or victim based perspective (ignoring for the moment the untold dogs that have been killed due to breed generated media hysteria) the greatest disservice the media, and others, have created by focusing on breed is that it completely ignores the real factors that directly contributed to the bite. Take, for example, the above case about the children throwing a blanket over a dog's head. Time and time again I have seen the media report an incident like this as "breed x" attacks child, with no mention of the circumstances of the bite, but, rather, with links to other attacks by "breed x" and a discussion on the history and genetics of "breed x" – none of which provided a single ounce of useful information on how this very preventable bite could have been avoided.

And for the record, this is not about blaming victims; this is about reporting information that will help understand the human-canine interactions that may lead to a dog responding with a bite.

Were the children to blame for teasing the dog? Was the dog to blame for biting the child? No, and no; children are allowed to play with dogs, and dogs are allowed to be frightened. The key to avoiding most dog-bite related incidents is for responsible adults to realize that children will be children, and dogs will be dogs, and to supervise these interactions in order to keep both children and dogs safe.