

Dogs, children can be a deadly mix

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I have frequently heard a comment made by visitors from the Lower States concerning their first impression of Alaska towns and villages. It goes something like this: "I've never seen so many babies and dogs!"

Certainly it is descriptive of the Alaskan scene. We have a large population of young people and young families who are living in a state that has traditionally had a large population of dogs for work. And now we have an even larger population of dogs that include racing animals.

Unfortunately, it is all too often that the seemingly innocent combination of babies and dogs leads to tragedy. The tragedy invariably involves a small child and a large dog. And the child is always the loser. The tragedy is called dog mauling.

Dog bites were the fifth leading cause of death in Native children ages 2 to 10 from 1977 through 1987. Only drownings, motor vehicle accidents, fires and deaths caused by firearms each accounted for more deaths than dog bites.

In all dog maulings which have resulted in death since 1955, the victim has been younger than 10 years old. Since 1981 there have been at least 21 pediatric admissions to the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage for treatment of dog bites.

More than half of these children have required surgery to repair the damage done by an attacking dog. And more often than not it is the face and neck of the victim that sustain the most damage.

Why do we have what has been described as an "epidemic" of dog maulings in the state? It is almost certain that the large numbers of small children combined with the large numbers of dogs found in Alaska towns and villages is part of the reason.

Some people think the problem is caused by dogs that are chained for long periods of time without attention or exercise.

I've heard from several people who think dogs who maul children are hungry dogs. Perhaps these are dogs who have been fed irregularly or not at all for long periods of time.

Another thought is that dogs who maul are the dogs who have been the targets of taunting children. Dogs who get pelted with stones and kicked by passers-by are thought to become "mean" dogs that attack when the opportunity arises.

Certainly some dog owners think the problem is caused by unsupervised children.

It is a fact that the majority of dog maulings in Alaska are the result of children entering the range of a restrained dog. It is also a fact that there exists a traditional expectation of the relative safety of the village for unsupervised children.

And how can we explain the maulings that occur even when adults are present? We cannot expect small children to use perfect judgement in their interactions with dogs. Especially when, which is unfortunately too frequently, children have inappropriate adult role modes. How many of us have growled or barked back at a restrained or fenced animal?

Why do we have an epidemic of death and destruction of Alaska children by dogs? The truth is we don't know. Exactly. Causation is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Probably it is a combination of all of the above reasons and perhaps some that haven't been identified yet.

Is it important to know exactly why it is happening before we do something about it? I think not.

In fact there are some very basic things that parents, children and dog owners can do now with little effort and little, if any, cost to help decrease the incidence of dog maulings.

As parents we can start with an awareness of the potential destructive capabilities that dogs possess. One researcher has found that dogs are capable of perforating sheet metal with a single bite. This feat requires 200 to 400 pounds of pressure per square inch.

We can teach our children, from a very early age, that dogs, just like all other living things, deserve a certain respect.

Then we can show them what that means. We can be role models for appropriate behavior toward dogs. We can take the time to correct a child who is abusing a dog, especially a dog that is restrained and limited in its normal ability to discourage such abuse.

Older children can be taught in school as well about the problem of dog maulings. Frequently it is an older child who is the only human large enough on the scene of a potential mauling to intercede.

As dog owners we can demonstrate responsible behavior. We can make sure that our animals are given adequate amounts of food and water on a daily basis. And we can be responsible by arranging for a substitute to attend to animals while we are away.

We can make sure that our animals are healthy and receive required immunizations. We can destroy animals that have bitten or exhibit signs of uncontrollable aggression.



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We can place inexpensive barriers between our dog lots and frequently traveled paths. Driftwood, broken down vehicles and rope are relatively available and would serve as barriers to access.

Any of these ideas, if made an everyday part of our lives, would help to decrease injury and death from dog maulings.

One other fact that we know about dog maulings is this: We are not alone. Even though Alaska has a rate of death from dog maulings that is many times that of the Lower States, there is hope that we can change that dismal statistic.

By recognizing that it is the canine teeth that penetrate soft tissue and tear during a dog mauling we can begin to focus on injury control methods that

will affect that particular aspect of mauling.

Western Greenland has had a program of canine teeth amputation in dogs for the past 30 years that appears to be effective and reported to be relatively harmless for the dogs.

More specific information about the long-term effects on the dogs needs to be obtained, however, before a similar project can be tried in Alaska.

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But it is certain that there is much that we can do today, as individuals and communities, to ensure that the combination does not explode into the tragedy that a dog mauling can be.