



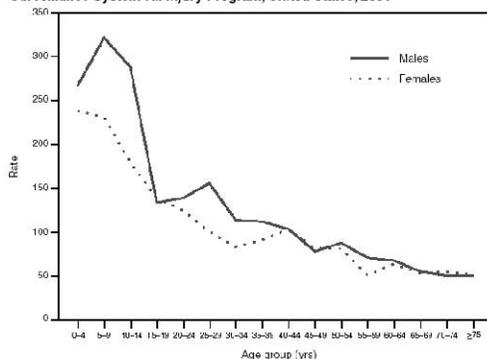
Spring 2005 Responsibility and the case of Max By Susan Linker, CEO, Our Companions

Max, a Golden Retriever belonging to the Pyon family of Watertown, CT, bit a child for the second and last time earlier this year. Though once given a reprieve, Max's second bite cost him his life and another child a lifetime of physical and emotional scars. Many questions surround this case but we think the most important questions are: why were there **two** incidents of children being bitten; and ultimately, why did Max have to die?

Max's Tale. Max first bit one of the children in his family as a puppy. When he was subsequently ordered to be euthanized, not only did his family rush to save him, but people across the country supported his release, including then-Governor John Rowland and Attorney General Richard Blumenthal. For seven months, Max was held in confinement by the Milford animal control officer who tested and observed Max in a variety of situations with adults and children. She was quoted in a *New York Times* article saying, "I could have gotten a therapy title on this dog, that's how much I trusted him." Although the animal control officer who originally seized Max disagreed, the public outcry for Max's release was so great that he was returned to the Pyon family.

Two years later, a woman visited the Pyon home. Her seven year-old son entered the house, despite instructions to wait in the car for his mother. Because there were no witnesses, the exact details are unknown. But at some point, the child walked to the kitchen where Max was being kept behind a gate and shortly thereafter, Max bit the child in the face. This time, Max was promptly killed.

FIGURE 1. Rate* of nonfatal dog bite-related injuries treated in U.S. hospital emergency departments, by sex and age group — National Electronic Injury Surveillance System-All Injury Program, United States, 2001



* Per 100,000 population.

Source: MMWR © 2003 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

The Anatomy of a Dog Bite. Like both of Max's victims, children are the most likely victims of dog bites. According to The Humane Society of the United States, 4.7 Million people in the U.S. are bitten by dogs every year. Half of the victims are children under the age of 13; and, children are three times more likely than adults to receive a serious bite, often to the face.

Dogs may bite for a variety of reasons including fear, excitement, pain, surprise or need to dominate. Unneutered males are most likely to bite, as are dogs who are unsocialized or not properly trained. And surprisingly, the vast majority of dog bites come from a family pet or the pet of a friend - a dog known to the victim - and the bite is most likely to occur in the family home.

Given these statistics, people are amazingly reckless with children and dogs. Why are people so permissive with their dogs, allowing them to sleep in their children's beds, allowing children to play rough with dogs or leaving children and dogs together unsupervised?

Breed and Biting. The Pyons clearly loved Max; but love is not enough to justify the return of an animal who had bitten a child to a home with children. Could it be that the Pyons were lulled into a sense of security based on their perception of the breed of their dog?

Because Max was a Golden Retriever, people wouldn't expect him to bite. Had Max been a pit bull or Akita, a bite would not have been such a surprise because media and public opinion reinforce this belief. But was that confidence well-placed?

Although there is evidence that there is a higher number of bites annually attributed to certain breeds, the data is very misleading.

The breeds that tend to be on the top of the list are usually the most popular and more dogs are likely to produce more bites. The data also does not reveal the percentage of the dogs that bite who were believed to be mistreated or abused. Furthermore, bites from certain breeds (e.g. Akitas, Rottweillers, German Sheperds) are more readily reported than those from many other breeds (e.g. smaller or toy breeds). Most experts agree: one particular breed is not more likely than another to bite.

It's Just a Language Barrier. Biting is a normal form of canine communication - the dog's way of saying, "Hey, back off. You're making me uncomfortable." However biting is generally preceded by warning signs that children are not capable of recognizing.

Each day, Our Companions receives calls from parents who are shocked that their dog growled or nipped at a child who has just tugged on a dog's ears, taken food from a dog or who surprised a dog while sleeping. The parents seem to think there is something wrong with the dog. Some consider giving their dog up for adoption and thers even consider killing the dog. The reality is that this is dog behavior in reaction to a violation of their boundaries. Children are ill-equipped to make assessments concerning dog behavior; so as adults and parents, it is our responsibility to protect children from natural dog behavior and to respect our dogs.



Who's Evelyn Hernandez? A young woman, pregnant with a baby boy she's expected to deliver in a week or so, disappears in California. Her body washes ashore in San Francisco bay and the man she loves is suspected of killing her. Sound familiar? What if you were told that this case never received much media attention and that the murder had never been solved?

Although strikingly similar to the Laci Peterson murder, the case above is actually that of a 24 year-old immigrant from El Salvador named Evelyn Hernandez. While it's curious that the circumstances around the Peterson and Hernandez deaths were very similar and occurred within months of each other, what's really striking is that you've probably never heard of Evelyn Hernandez. Unless you've been hiding under a rock since 2003, you could probably describe Laci Peterson, name her unborn son and husband and rattle off many other details of her life.

Pregnant with the baby of another woman's husband and the unwed mother of a five-year old son, Evelyn's life differed markedly from that of Laci's seemingly charmed life. There was no family pleading for her safe return and no perfect life for Evelyn to return to. While no one an say for sure why Laci received so much media attention and Evelyn received almost none, it can be speculated that the media and the public were attracted to Laci's life, her "all-american" good looks and the love of her close-knit family. Conversely, the public was not attracted to Evelyn's story because she was not our ideal.

Perception and Value. The lack of media attention surrounding the murder of Evelyn Hernandez highlights the disparity between those lives we see as valuable and those we do not. Evelyn's story was

not picked up by the media because they knew her story would not resonate strongly with the public. Laci was immediately appealing and drew people to her story. Whether it's intentional or not, our society puts a higher value on certain people; and the same is true for animals.

If Max had been a pit bull, he would have been killed after the first bite. In fact, thousands of pit bulls are killed every year as soon as they enter shelters simply because some people perceive they are dangerous and therefore have little value. Society views Golden Retrievers differently though. Max the Golden Retriever received a second chance. And many are wondering whether or not Max should have received that second chance.

Two Children Too Many. According to the animal control officer who originally seized him, Max should have been euthanized. But other experts, animal behaviorists who studied Max at length, did not find aggressive tendencies. Given the conflicting opinions and Max's history, there was another option for Max which tragically no one considered. He should have been placed in an adult home without access to children. His life would be spared, children would be safe, and today someone would have a wonderful, loving pet.



Who's Responsible? As individuals, our responsibility is to always be wary of other people's pets. Rather than assuming that a dog is friendly, even if it is a Golden Retriever, assume that the dog does not want to be approached. Because children are the most at risk, extra care should be taken around dogs with children present. Children should be monitored around dogs and taught to treat them properly.

As owners, we have the ultimate responsibility for our dogs. Acting responsibly will protect people from harm; and, it will also save your dog from paying for a bite with its life.

As a society, we should take ownership of the dog bite issue and put the blame where it ought to lie - on ourselves. Through thousands of years of evolution and selective breeding, we have shaped the dog - its appearance, temperament and physical health -to meet our own very specific requirements. Although dogs have proven to be worthy companion animals, it seems that they have suffered from an erosion of respect. We have to reverse this trend and realize that dogs have boundaries and that they should be respected.

We created the Golden Retriever and pit bull. Today, the pit bull needs our help more than ever because they are suffering needlessly at the hands of money-hungry backyard breeders, drug dealers and even shelters who are quick to euthanize away the problem. It's time to extend our concern beyond the Golden Retrievers and embrace all breeds.