

The Delta Dog Safe™ Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The Delta Dog Safe Program provides education to children and adults to reduce the incidence of dog bites in local communities. Following recent successful trials on primary school children, Delta Australia have developed a comprehensive package incorporating a training seminar, lesson plan, teacher's resource kit, early childhood kit, community brochure and the Delta Dalmatian. The Delta Dog Safe Program can be structured to meet the needs of regions and may be run by local councils and health professionals. Delta Dog Safe™ — Providing education to children and adults to reduce the incidence of dog bites in local communities.

THE DELTA DOG SAFE™ STRATEGY

Many dog bites occur because neither adults nor children have been educated about appropriate behaviour around dogs. A dog in the family is a wonderful source of companionship and fun. The benefits of positive interaction between people and their pets have been well documented. But there are some very important messages about canine behaviour that are not being provided to dog owners.

In response to this problem Delta Society Australia has developed the Delta Dog Safe™ strategy. The program promotes practical, proactive and dog friendly ways in which local government personnel, health professionals and volunteers, working with school communities, can educate children and their parents about safe and sensible behaviour and interactions with 'man's best friend'.

In a country of 19 million people with a canine population of 4 million, it is estimated that each year dogs bite more than 100,000 Australians with varying degrees of severity. An estimated 12,000 to 14,000 seek treatment in the Accident & Emergency Departments of the nation's public hospitals and almost 1,400 of those who attend Accident & Emergency have injuries that are serious enough to warrant hospitalisation ¹.

The annual cost to the community for treating dog bite injuries in the Accident & Emergency Departments of Australian public hospitals is estimated to be in excess of \$7 million. This does not include the many cases treated by general practitioners or at hospitals in regional Australia. While monetary costs can be calculated, the costs in relation to personal suffering cannot. The emotional scarring of a dog bite may affect an individual in many ways, including inducing a fear of dogs as well as personal disfigurement. This could lead to decreased self-esteem and cause the person to withdraw socially. The costs for an individual requiring counselling have not been estimated.

Legislation for regulation of dangerous and stray dogs and control of dogs in public places (muzzling, leashing) is well established in most municipalities but penalties alone without targeted community education programs are only marginally effective. And it cannot be stressed too strongly that two out of every three bites involve the family, friend or neighbour's pet dog 'in the back yard' and 60% of all serious bites occur in children under ten years of age.

Early in 1999 the Society contracted an education consultant, Lynne Sung, to develop a teacher resource kit for use in conjunction with classroom presentations to teach junior primary school children about safe behaviour around dogs — the family and friend's dog as well as the stray or street dog. A randomised, controlled trial was then commissioned by Delta to test the methodology. It involved almost three hundred students in eight junior primary schools in suburban Sydney. The results of the trial, designed and supervised by Professor Simon Chapman, were published in the British Medical Journal on 3rd June 2000 (bmj.com). Children's behaviour around a tethered dog in the school playgrounds was videotaped, using a concealed video camera, and compared in 'intervention' and control schools. The results showed a very significant modification in risk taking behaviour ².

The research indicates that junior primary school children can be taught successfully how to behave safely around dogs, provided there is teacher commitment to the program and teachers are provided with resources and reference material for use before and after classroom demonstrations. At the same time it is essential that parents — the children's role models — and other adult members of the community are educated about safe behaviour around dogs.

Classroom experience has also provided evidence that the use of a large stuffed toy dog for the classroom and public demonstrations produces results which are very similar, if not identical, to those produced using real dogs. This is based on the class room behaviour during presentations and subsequent recall and has obvious implications for productivity and safety. Indeed, management of individual children who may be 'acting out' during a presentation is much easier if the presenter is using a large toy dog. A further practical advantage is that puppets are not subject to either heat, physical or psychological stress and have very placid temperaments!

Recent research has attempted to extend the earlier study commissioned by Delta to investigate whether similar safety strategies can be successfully acquired by preschool children. In this research, preschool children were divided into four experimental groups:

- a no intervention control group;
- a group in which the children were presented with a 30 min information package, using the Delta Dog Safe™ puppet and information from the Delta Dog Safe kit;
- a group in which Dog Safe information was sent home to parents; and
- a final group in which parents attended the Dog Safe presentation with their children.

Prior to the intervention, each child was shown a range of pictures featuring dogs in various contexts and was asked whether they would approach the dog or not. Parents were also asked to complete a questionnaire designed to measure the frequency of inappropriate behaviour by their child towards dogs. Two weeks after the intervention all children were tested again to establish whether or not the information had been retained. The results confirm that the Dog Safe message can be acquired even by the very young children known to be in the highest risk group for dog bite injuries, although the involvement of parents and teachers in disseminating and reinforcing the information is critical.

Delta Australia has now developed a comprehensive package to standardise the Delta Dog Safe™ strategy³. This includes:

- a teacher resource kit;
- a lesson plan for classroom presenters;
- Danny, the Delta Dalmatian, a large stuffed toy dog;
- a brochure for parent and community education;
- an information kit for maternal & child health nurses; and
- a one day regional training seminar, conducted by accredited Delta trainers, for presenters and program coordinators, particularly health professionals in early childhood development and Council officers involved in environmental and occupational health as well as volunteers.

Each package can be 'purpose built' and costed to meet the identified needs of regions, based on local demography and circumstances. Further details and cost estimates are available from:

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Footnotes:

¹ Dog bites and injury prevention. A critical review and research agenda. Ozanne-Smith, J, Ashby, K and Stathakis, V. Paper presented to the Animals, Community Health and Public Policy Symposium. The University of Sydney. November 1998.

² Preventing dog bites in children: randomised controlled trial of an educational intervention. Simon Chapman, John Cornwall, Joanne Righetti, and Lynne Sung BMJ 2000; 320: 1512-1513.

³ DELTA DOG SAFE™ Providing education to children and adults to reduce the incidence of dog bites in local communities. Compiled by Karen Damiani & Jenny Pearce. Edited by Dr Joanne Righetti & Dr John Cornwall. Reviewed by Dr Kersti Seksel

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Pauleen Bennett is a registered psychologist and lectures in neuropsychology and behavioural neuroscience at Monash University. She has an interest in both human and animal welfare and how human-animal interactions can produce health benefits for all species. She is also chair of Delta Victoria, a sub-committee of Delta Society Australia.

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