

Success in preventing dog bite injury: Launceston City Council's Community Education Model

G. Causon, Launceston City Council and A. Boxhall, Delta Dog Safe Tasmania

Introduction – A. Boxhall

Children and dogs belong together but they belong together safely – a simple statement with many implications for parents, children, dog owners, dog-lovers, child-carers, teachers, health professionals, dog breeders, dog adoption agencies and animal management officers.

Our working roles provide us with an excellent opportunity to make life safer for children, families, communities and their dogs by actively promoting safe behaviour around dogs. Simple and easily delivered safety messages can and do make all the difference.

We say this because after three years and 16,000 child participants in Dog Safe sessions in Tasmanian primary schools, the 'stories' are coming in. By 2008, after five years of community education along with data collection by Department of Health and Human Services, we can expect some meaningful statistics.

A sample of anecdotal evidence includes the following two incidents related by teachers who had previously participated in Delta Dog Safe sessions.

1. Rhonda Wilson, an early childhood teacher related this incident to her class during a Dog Safe presentation to illustrate how she had used the information to protect herself. Having arrived at a weekend retreat on the state's east coast, Rhonda was approached by two Rottweilers from a neighbouring property. Both dogs were menacing her, making direct and prolonged eye contact and showing their teeth. She folded her arms, stood still and looked away for as long as it took – she estimates about eight minutes before the dogs turned and headed off and it was safe to proceed from the car to the house. Up until this actual incident, she had been sceptical that by simply standing still, an aggressive or threatening dog would be likely to back off. Rhonda Wilson directly attributed her actions (and subsequent safety) to information received through a Dog Safe session from the previous year.

2. Joscelyn Pullen and her son were cornered at the end of a cul-de-sac by a large dog which had come out of its property and followed them. The dog's body language was menacing and confrontational. The mother, a primary teacher had previously participated in Dog Safe classes so instructed her son to fold his arms, look away and stand still. Because they were bailed up in the dog's territory and judged that they could be standing there a very long time, they opted to move slowly away without changing their stance. The dog followed, nose held at the back of their legs, until they were clear of the cul-de-sac. Joscelyn indicated the Dog Safe session had given her the confidence to think through their situation instead of making a panic response.

And finally this incident which was ultimately one of the motivating forces behind the introduction of Delta Dog Safe in this state.

2000 – Hobart, Tasmania

Jake, aged 5 years is bitten on his face by his own dog. Jake and his dog have been mates for two years and have enjoyed that special affinity that kids and dogs often have. Jake's injuries require hospitalisation, the dog is put down and everyone is distressed. What happened? Jake had decided to play a game of fetch with his dog using a bone which his dog was chewing on. Jake was simply unaware of the risks associated with approaching dogs when they are eating.

These incidents demonstrate how a little information can go a long way. Garry Causon's Dog Safe experiences in his role with Launceston City Council will show this even more vividly.

Dog Safe currently operates in Tasmania, South Australia and planning is underway for its introduction in NSW. The program offers training for presenters, a word for word lesson plan and teaching materials. The 30 minute classroom session teaches children how to recognise whether a dog is friendly, frightened or angry, how to safely pat a dog and what to do if confronted by a stray or unknown dog. Live dogs are not used in Dog Safe classroom presentations. In this state, five councils have AMO's who present Dog Safe in schools. A further Dog Safe educators training day will be held on October 14th.

In 2004, Launceston City Council chose to send two AMO's to the Delta Dog Safe training course led by Dr. Joanne Righetti. The experiences of one of those officers, Garry Causon, demonstrates the value of the Dog Safe program for children, their parents, their dogs and for those councils who choose to directly educate their communities on safety around dogs.

G. Causon

During my eight years with the Launceston City Council my main area of interest has been animal control and mainly dogs. It is unfortunate that over this time I have had to deal with numerous dog attacks and lots involving children. I have seen children with horrific injuries to all parts of their tiny bodies and unfortunately a lot of these attacks were avoidable if simple education classes had been given to the children.

I am a father of two small kids and have two dogs myself. Each time I went to the scene of an injured child and saw the anguish on the parents faces it made me resolute to find a way of helping children to understand how to act and behave around dogs. It made me feel that if I could help to save one from injury that it would make me happy.

I recall one attack vividly. A father rang me up in tears and asked me to come to his house and to help him by taking his pet dog and have it put down. When I got there I found that his son who was aged six (6) years had been watching him fix his car in his rear yard. Their dog, a giant Bull Mastiff, and which they had got as a puppy when their son was born, was in the yard also.

It appears that the dog had dug a hole and unearthed a stinking green piece of meat and the boy reached down and grabbed it. The dog immediately launched itself and took off half of the boy's right cheek, disfiguring him for life. The boy was taken to the Hospital by his distraught mother whilst I dealt with the shattered father. I took him and the dog to a local vet, and the father collapsed when the dog was put down.

Both parents were looking for answers as to why their beloved

pet dog, which had grown up with the boy and appeared to be his best mate, would do such an act. A simple lesson to the child about staying away from a dog with its food would, more than likely, have altered the course of things and maybe today they could have all been living together happily.

I was lucky enough to attend a Delta Dog Safe Educators Training Course in April, 2004, and I found it great. It gave me the confidence, skills and the tools that I needed to go out into the schools and to give out dog safety lessons. Finally I had found a terrific way of teaching kids the knowledge needed to aid in preventing themselves from being bitten by a dog. I started with none more important - my own kids who were then aged five (5) and six (6). I did several test runs on mine and it pleased me to see that they had retained the messages I had put across.

I was ready to go then so I set up a database and contacted all of the primary schools in the Launceston municipality. I targeted the classes Kindergarten to Grade 4 and between July, 2004, and October, 2005, my partner and I attended 25 schools and gave out 225 1/2 hours lessons to 5866 children. My God we were busy, but by God I enjoyed it. I have never been into the teaching side of things before but I found the classroom environment enjoyable. It was also fun at times. One of the questions I always ask is "What sorts of things can we come up with that may scare a dog?" Believe it or not the most common answer was - Dinosaurs!!! Crocodiles came in a close second and some of the boys' sisters regularly got a mention.

The stuffed dog I take into the classroom with me I call Gerri. He is starting to look a bit worse for wear now. His stomach has gone all droopy, his tongue is nearly falling off and he now stands a bit funny but the kids love him and I haven't got the heart to part with him.

We give all the children a show bag which contains a balloon, six stickers with messages on them, information sheets for their parents and these are all contained in a doggy poo bag. The children are shown the bag and its contents at the beginning of my talk and informed that each will receive one if they show me at the end of the class what they have learnt. This, I believe, helps them to concentrate for a period.

I developed a running sheet and after giving my talk just a few times I found it extremely easy to remember and covers every simple but important point that a child should know when around a dog. The children are shown how to stand when approached by a strange dog and how to react if they are attacked to the ground. They all tell me that it is their first instinct to run if they see a dog running towards them and I explain the reasons why we shouldn't run. Another important point that I explain to them is to tell someone about the stray dog. Go into a Safety House, nearby shop or tell their parents if they are close to home. I show them my catching pole which is certainly worse for wear with numerous bite marks all over it and this keeps their interest as well.

Simple things like how to wake their dogs up correctly, what to look for when going into a house yard for the first time are fully covered. Dangerous Dog signs and collars are explained and placards of dogs are used to enable the children to pick the differences between aggressive, frightened and happy dogs. Asking permission to pat a dog and where exactly to pat it is explained in detail.

Shortly before the end of the class I have a review on what the children have learned and I get them to all call out together with the answers and even though it may sound noisy I can tell that my messages have got through. To finish with Gerri gets a pat from each and every child in the class.

I was surprised to find that there were children, not a lot admittedly, that were too scared even to pat a stuffed dog and took a lot of encouragement to do so.

Once I had actually started visiting the schools and giving out the talks I then found that other schools were contacting me direct requesting me to attend their schools. The message was being spread by word of mouth and school meetings which also pleased me. I also had hundreds of drawing, posters and alike being sent to me at Council by children I had spoken to. I was so rapt that I organised a display of their work at the Customer Service area of the Town Hall so that the general public could see that Launceston City Council was taking dog education seriously and actually getting out there and doing something positive.

I had numerous phone calls from both parents and school Principals alike thanking me for my efforts and the feedback was always positive. I recall two lots of feed back which made me chuckle. One was from a parent who rang me to thank me for my presentation to her child but, as they did not own a dog, was a bit put off by her child wanting to walk the streets and collect dog poo as her child did not want to waste the poo bag he had been given. Another call was from a school principal who was on lunchtime playground duty and she called out "What do you do if you are knocked over by a dog?" She said it was a marvellous sight to see the whole playground full of kids go down onto the ground and curl up into a ball. I also found that it doesn't have to cost a great deal to give out the educational talks to school children. Most of the materials needed for our talks are supplied by Delta and Launceston City Council has a very small budget to operate in and this is easily achieved even though, as I have stated, we give classes to twenty five (25) schools.

The Northern Tasmania Day Carers Association also contacted me after hearing what Council was doing throughout the schools and I gave out a presentation to a large group of them one evening. I gave them an abridged version of the schools talk with the aim of these people re-enforcing the principals concerning dogs to the children that they cared for. They informed me that they often encountered stray dogs when they took the children on outings but really didn't know what to advise them. I was also surprised that, even though a lot of the day carers had dogs at their homes, there were no guide lines in place in respect to the times that the children and the dogs could socialise. I now believe that, after my presentation, strict guide lines have been set in place when it is used as a day care house and there is a dog living on the property.

It is almost impossible for me to evaluate results from our educational presentations. I can only hope that I have made a difference in respect to reducing the amount of children bitten by dogs in the Launceston municipality. No doubt there have been some but since I began giving my presentations I have only had to attend one dog attack involving a child. As it turned out about two weeks after giving Rocherlea Primary School children dog safe lessons I was called by Police to a serious attack by two Pit Bull dogs on a woman and a five year old boy named Jai. Jai had been given one of my talks.

Unfortunately Jai had kicked a ball and had jumped over his rear fence into a Unit yard containing two Pit Bulls to retrieve it. The owner of the dogs was not at home. His mother and two other women were inside his house when they heard his screams. Evidence obtained later revealed that when they got to the fence and looked over Jai was curled up into a ball on the ground with his hands over his head exactly like I had shown him in my lesson at his school. Both Pit Bulls were hovering over him waiting to rip him apart if he moved. He had already been bitten once on the arm requiring six stitches.

