



Dogs Bite: But Balloons and Slippers Are More Dangerous

Janis Bradley

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Dogs are dangerous. And they are more dangerous to children than to adults. Not as dangerous of course, as kitchen utensils, drapery cords, five-gallon water buckets, horses, or cows. Not nearly as dangerous as playground equipment, swimming pools, skateboards, or bikes. And not remotely as dangerous as family, friends, guns, or cars. Here's the reality. Dogs almost never kill people. A child is more likely to die choking on a marble or a balloon, and an adult is more likely to die in a bedroom slipper related accident. Your chances of being killed by a dog are roughly one in 18 million. You are twice as likely to win a super lotto jackpot on a single ticket than be killed by a dog. You are five times as likely to be killed by a bolt of lightning than be killed by a dog. Because it is so extraordinary, lightning is often regarded as a universal cliché for an Act of God. Dog-attack deaths are even more extraordinary—five times more extraordinary. The supposed epidemic numbers of dog bites splashed across the media are absurdly inflated by dubious research and by counting bites that don't actually hurt anyone. Even when dogs do injure people, the vast majority of injuries are at the Band-Aid level. Dogs enhance the lives of millions more people than even the most inflated estimates of dog-bite victims. Search-and-rescue and cancer-detecting dogs save significant numbers of human lives, and assistance dogs enormously improve the quality of many more. Infants who live with dogs have fewer allergies. People with dogs have less cardiovascular disease, better heart attack survival, and fewer backaches, headaches, and flu symptoms. Petting your dog lowers stress and people who live with dogs just plain feel better than people who don't. Yet lawmakers, litigators, and insurers press for less dog ownership. This must stop. We must maintain perspective. Yes, dogs bite. But even party balloons and bedroom slippers are more dangerous. "A tour-de-force examination of dog bites. Among other persuasive appeals for sanity, Janis Bradley has outed "lumping": the erroneous connection between kitchen-injury level bites and maiming or fatal dog attacks. She dares to be rational. Her rationality will—hopefully—raise the level of discussion in a topic mired in hysteria. Why do we get so excited about this particular class of injury? Enter the irrational. Human brains are organs that evolved for a single overarching purpose: to maximize the representation of genes possessed by an individual brain's owner in subsequent generations. We evolved in a different environment than the one we currently inhabit, however. Because of this, we are genetically predisposed to learn to fear animals with pointy teeth much more than to fear, say, hurtling along in hunks of metal at sixty-five miles per hour. Our brains are also not reliable truth detection devices. Any instances of truth detection are lucky by-products of selection for reproductive success. Scientific method was developed because of the chronic, abysmal failure of our brains to dope out reality, coupled with a fascination to know truth. Our intuitions are flat-footed much of the time. Stephen Jay Gould once mused, "the invalid assumption that correlation implies cause is probably among the two or three most serious and common errors of human reasoning." If one searches the backgrounds of that small minority of dogs that kill people, lo and behold, many of them will have previously engaged in species-normal ritualized aggression: growls, snarls and kitchen-injury or less level bites in predictable contexts. This then becomes the foundation for the faulty causal leap, a slippery slope argument that says: if a dog is growly around his food dish, he will someday seriously hurt or kill someone. What is omitted is that a significant percentage of all dogs engage in species-normal ritualized aggression and the overwhelming majority will never hurt, much less kill, anyone. A sign

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