Dogs and Children

Like many cocktails, this is a potentially explosive mixture. I speak with some experience, having grown up in a disciplined but gentle family and then seen with horror the current generation of children running amok in supermarkets and shouting at their parents unchecked, or worse a mother unknowingly joining in the children's fun by screaming back at the child.

But perhaps I should start at the beginning.

As all of you who have read The History of the World (part 2) would know, I was born at a very early age into a family that bred German Shepherd dogs or as they were then known in that part of the world, Alsatians. A name familiar to every Pom, however, not quite so many Poms realise that this name was conjured (con job) up by a man who later became Lord Brabazon of Tara, who, I'm sad to say was a fellow countryman of mine.

As I grew up fairly wild on the moors, my family delegated my welfare to a large, black "Alsatian". In these days of exploitation he would have been hailed, due to both his colour and build, as a 'Working Dog.' Which, when I think of it, would have been a pretty good description, as he would have had his work cut out looking after me.

Having lived with dogs during my early formative years, then during my twenty-two years of service in the British Army, I came to know and understand more than just a little about animals and their reactions. My children grew up in West Africa in a house that was a virtual menagerie. An African Grey Parrot, Joey, who must be named first, was more of a family member than all the others. He later travelled the world with us. The baby sitter, come nanny, was a female Vervet monkey.

She only weighed about 5 kilos but she had a set of teeth that would put one of Steve Irwin's crocs to shame. Chippy as the Vervet monkey was called, was a fierce protector of the children, even the houseboys trod carefully in her presence while she was with the children, yet she was so gentle and loving with children and the rest of the family.

With the children having been taught how to behave with, and handle, all creatures with gentleness and care, I trusted them and the animals together. Other members of our menagerie, were a two and a half metre long Royal Python, who thought she'd charm visitors by twining through the back of their cane chair and draping herself across their arms, but she was mistaken, and a one and a half metre long monitor lizard, which had been taught to walk on lead by my nine year old daughter Denise, and who eagerly followed her to the huge termite mounds, waiting for her to go into attack with her deadly machete, so that he could feast on the seething termites. We were privileged to have the trust of an ever hungry African Hedgehog who soon took to patrolling the corridor and all the bedrooms at night, hunting our fascinating four inch long cockroaches. They say all things are bigger in the West, well that must go for West Africa too.

There were so many beautiful small creatures around, that it was impossible for us to murder any pests with spray, instead we welcomed the natural predators of creepy crawlies and the host of flying things like mozzies as huge as those in Mandurah, and they are as big as helicopters. There was a myriad of different coloured tame birds, all with access to the house. Finally there was Butch, an English Setter, supposedly the family guard dog but he competed with Chippy for the position of protector of the children.

They seemed to have reached a compromise with Chippy on duty inside the house and Butch accompanying my tomboy girls on their adventures into the African bush around the compound.

Many of the animal traits had become part of my own behaviour pattern, especially those of the dog, so much so that Honey, when we first got together, took a long time to adjust to my fixation on lamp posts.

As a consequence of having lived in a number of exotic parts of the world while serving in the army, I eventually settled here in this equally exotic land of opportunity, where I was lucky enough to become employed by two government departments as an expert on exotic birds and dogs.

One aspect of my job was investigating dog attacks, of which there are so many reported, as many as three per day, but most of which had nothing to do with a dog making contact. Often it was a stray who happened to look at someone in an unfriendly way. But in the overall picture often presented by some authorities, especially when wanting to introduce new dog legislation, these even after investigation, remained on the books as an attack. Sometimes these reports were funny. A confident lady rang the Department to report that an Alsatian, German Shepherd cross had entered her kitchen and stole the meat meant for the evening meal. When asked how she knew it was an Alsatian GSD cross, she said she had studied to become a judge and she knew her dogs. It looked like an Alsatian but showed the sneaky intelligence of the GSD.

One such report was, where I was called to investigate and apprehend a savage German Shepherd on one of the city beaches. When I arrived at the beach I found the frightened lady, who was safely locked inside her car, and nothing was going to get her to leave it, until the beast had been subdued. She pointed out the 'savage GSD' still playing on the beach. Calling the dog over to me, an action, which caused the lady to turn several shades paler, I stood beside her car patting the offending dog. I asked why she thought this dog was a German Shepherd.

She assured me that she knew all about such things from the media, stating that they were large, black and tan, and of course, savage. The dog whic she positively identified was in fact an Airedale. But in spite of submitting a detailed report to that effect, the "attack" was firmly recorded by the city council as having been committed by an Alsatian.

These sad stories are typified by a man who had taken his Great Dane to the pound to be destroyed after attacking a visiting child, who had been playing in the back garden, unsupervised with the children of the house. Two days later the dog's owner came back to the pound to save his Dane, but too late, the dog had gone. (Spirited away by us Rangers, who assessed the dog, found him safe and re-homed him. Like adoptions, the info is confidential)

The man had belatedly asked his son what really happened in the attack and the boy told him that the Dane was in the garden with them while he and his friends had been playing (unsupervised) cowboys and Indians, complete with cap guns. One of the visiting children had 'shot' the Dane with a cap gun during their game but it wouldn't lie down dead, so he had hit the dog on the head several times with the gun. The Dane growled at him, but he hit it again and again and still it wouldn't play dead, until finally it grabbed him, and then the boy started screaming. Most of the incoherent screaming was along the lines, of "I did nothing, I dunno, he just bit me." Typical.

Many attacks that do occur involving bites are perpetrated by unsocialised dogs, mainly dogs which have little or no exposure to children, especially small children. Such dogs recognise adults as normal, however, through lack of exposure, cannot cope with small children and may quickly snap to defend themselves. Their height, silhouette and movement are different, as is their erratic gait, and habit of screaming and falling over on the slightest pretext. A child, shrieking with joy and rushing to throw its arms around a dog is through sheer necessity seen as a threat and treated as such. The media of course will then report another unprovoked dog attack. Here, the dog owner and child's parents are equally to blame for lacking supervision and inadequate upbringing of both, child and dog!

There are several major safeguards to limit attacks on children. The first of these, the most basic and most important, is NO running or screaming around animals, (except at German Shepherd Specialty Shows). You wish!

One would think this to be so basic and yet at Dog Shows, where there should be maximum understanding, it's not unusual to see unsupervised children running amok. Owners should realise the importance of socialising dogs that live in an adult only environment, and the need to mix and mingle with children, especially around schools. Whenever you see mothers pulling their children away from your dog, talk to them, ask if the child can pat your dog. Teaching the dog a simple trick of sitting to shake hands will often win over the parents. Carry treats for kiddies to offer the dog when you go for a walk! Teach children how to "say hallo" and pat a dog.

Where Dog Shows could be seen to score over Obedience classes, is that the show dogs grow quickly accustomed to being in close quarters with other dogs and especially other breeds, at a very young age.

Whereas in beginner obedience classes, the very opposite seems to be more true. Too many people wait until their dog has become a problem before enrolling in classes with a dog that is no longer a young malleable puppy but a difficult juvenile that has already acquired behavioural problems due to lacking socialisation. If they are unfortunate, they may even in today's enlightened times, still end up with a trainer who believes in 'Discipline". This may be a trainer to whom that word means giving a sharp yank on the lead (or even worse, using a chain choker) and then the chances are, that the antisocial behaviour will quickly worsen, and become a fear of reprisal at the approach of another dog or person. Dog owners would be advised to choose a training school where positive reinforcement training is taught instead of the old traditional compulsion.

Which brings me to something that parents often think is so clever and cute, but has the potential to cause disaster, and that is young children mimicking Mummy or Daddy's actions while training. It is acceptable to a dog that a senior pack member can reprimand them or withhold food for instance, but it would resent to the point of disciplining the child in their own doggy way, i.e. nipping if the child tried to do the same. Come to think of it, a dog that is reprimanded or punished by an adult of the household will quite likely pass the same treatment on to a young child that is behaving inappropriately towards the dog. Where dogs are trained with treats, rather than jerks on the lead, the risk of children misbehaving with the dog is lessened! They should still always be supervised!

The potential for accidents and bites is an area where size just does not matter. I believe the first reported fatal attack on a child in the UK, was perpetrated by a breed of dog only 30cm at the shoulder.

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