

DOGS *today*

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VICTORIA STILWELL:



How to **STOP**
dog attacks
on children

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Innocent blood

How many more children have to die before people will start facing their responsibilities as dog owners? Victoria Stilwell shares her ideas for how to stop the needless deaths once and for all...



Following the tragic death of 13-month-old Archie-Lee, who was mauled to death in Yorkshire recently by his grandparents' Rottweiler, I am deeply saddened and angry. Another little angel has been killed in an appalling way, and as a mother, a dog lover and a dog trainer, my heart is breaking as much as my blood is boiling, because this attack (and most others like it) could have been avoided.

Above all else, my heart goes out to little Archie-Lee and his family - particularly his aunts (aged six, seven and 16) who were looking after him at the time and witnessed the tragedy. They will most likely blame themselves for what happened to Archie-Lee, which is a tragedy in itself because the real blame lies not with them but with the Rottweiler's owners - Archie-Lee's grandparents, who had obtained the dog six months earlier and had apparently used him as a guard dog, keeping him in their back garden.

According to reports, neighbours and relatives were concerned about this Rottie's temperament - describing him as 'nasty' and detailing how he aggressively jumped up at the back gate when anyone passed by. A 10-stone Rottweiler kept as a guard dog in a small back garden with little stimulation: all the necessary ingredients in a recipe for disaster. I'm sure, like every other family, they didn't think it would happen to them, but it has and tragic situations like this will keep happening until owners stand up and take responsibility for the pets they have in their homes. The time for talk is over and action must be taken now.

Positive change can only be brought about by changing the law. As has been sadly proven by recent events, the Dangerous Dogs Act is not an effective piece of legislation. It was a hastily written, ill-conceived, knee-jerk reaction to a similar spate of dog attacks in the early 1990s, and is misguided in its well-intended efforts to curb dog aggression towards humans. Most aggressive dogs are aggressive either because their owners want them to be aggressive, or because their owners haven't provided the environment, training and tools necessary to raise and care for a well-adjusted family pet. Therefore, any government legislation regarding dangerous dogs should first target the true root of almost all dog behaviour problems - irresponsible owners.

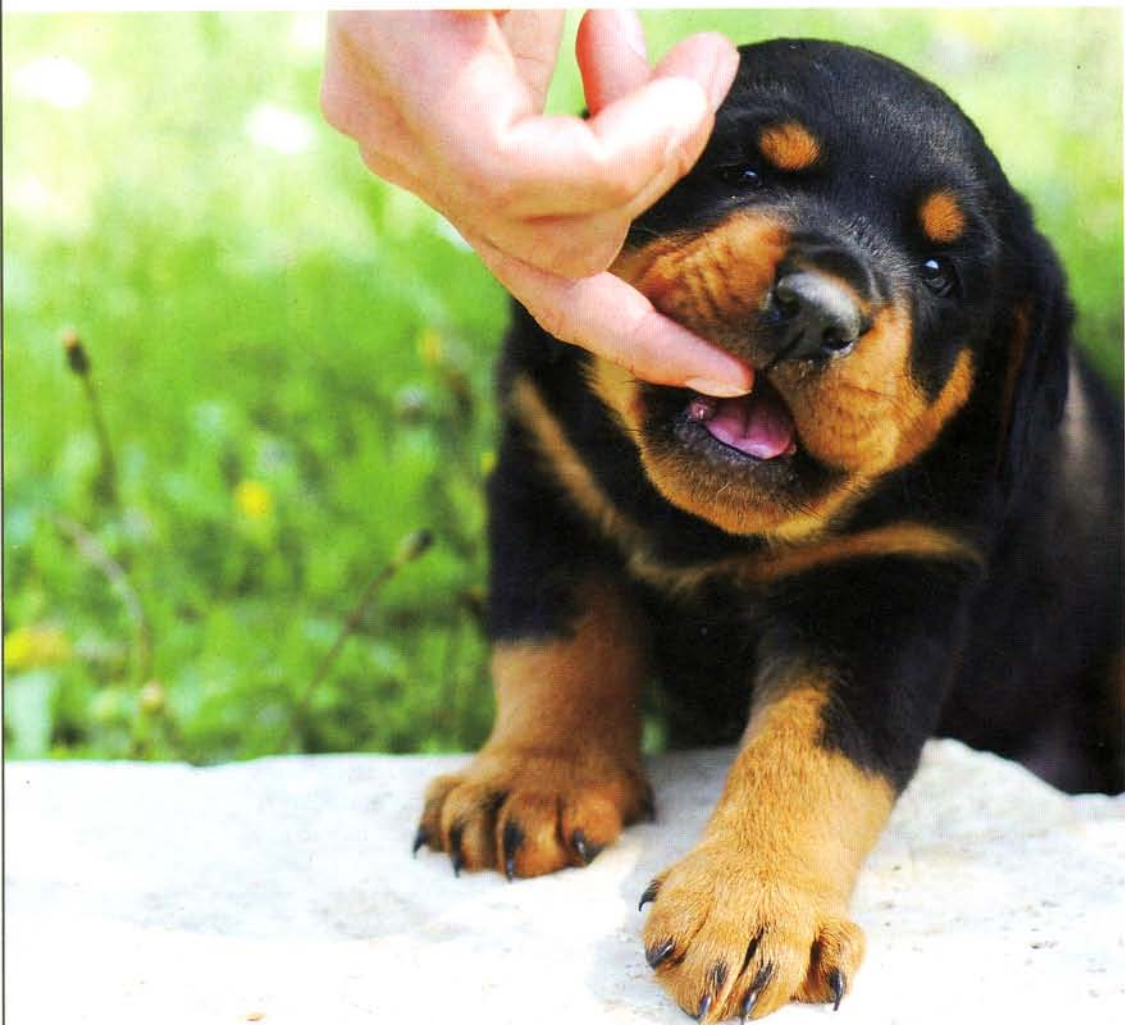
This doesn't mean banning another breed - I am against breed-specific legislation and am very frustrated by the breed-related witch hunts that have been happening over the last few years. Any breed of dog can bite. Any breed of dog can be a good pet. It is true that, over the years, certain breeds have been bred for fighting, herding and hunting, and unfortunately, certain groups of people seek out these dogs specifically to be 'guard dogs'. Did Archie-Lee's grandparents really need a guard dog? What was the real danger that must be guarded against? For a small, sad segment of society, it has become 'macho' to own one of these dogs, because they consider the animals a status symbol while they celebrate and encourage the dogs' aggression.

These people should be the target of the Dangerous Dogs Act, not entire breeds of dog.

I've fostered and trained countless Rottweilers and Pit Bulls in America (where Pit Bulls are not illegal except in certain states), and have found them to make very good pets, provided (as with any dog) that their owners are responsible. Worst of all, the DDA hasn't changed anything - children are still losing their lives because the powers that be (most of them ignoring any expert advice) have attacked and condemned the wrong end of the lead. Now I am calling for positive change, beginning with the following suggestions:

- Serious prison time and fines for owners whose dogs viciously attack humans.
- Mandatory dog training for owners whose dogs show uncommon aggression to humans and other dogs.
- Effective policing of owners reported to be in possession of a dog that has shown potentially dangerous behaviour.
- Mandatory registration for every dog owner.
- Mandatory training and education for all first-time dog owners in order to obtain a 'right to own'. You can't drive a car without learning how to drive and passing your driving test. You shouldn't be able to own a dog without first learning how to effectively care and raise that dog. Then dog and owner have to attend training classes at a recognised training establishment to gain their full 'right to own' licence.
- Compulsory education for

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children in all schools about dogs and how to live safely with them.

- Easy access to dog safety information for all parents or guardians - they bear the ultimate responsibility for their child's safety education.
- Ban all puppy farms. Puppy farmers breed only for profit without regard for the conditions of the breeding bitches or for the health and temperament of their puppies. Many puppies sold from these farms are unable to cope when living with humans and can experience intense physical and psychological problems throughout their lives. Puppies raised by responsible breeders in caring environments are less likely to experience these problems.
- Ban all selling of puppies and dogs on the internet, papers, in pubs, pet stores, etc unless the breeders are registered with a respected and government-recognised organisation.
- More responsibility must be taken by rescue shelters when rehoming dogs. There needs

to be better assessment of a dog's temperament, family suitability, home visits, etc.

- Scrap the Dangerous Dogs Act. Use this country's amazing dog behaviour resources to completely rewrite the laws regarding dogs, omitting any reference to specific breeds and focusing instead on punishing and deterring irresponsible ownership.

This seems like a tall order, but if we're serious about curtailing these awful attacks, I truly believe that positive change can and must be achieved one step at a time - much like positive dog training.

We all need to take responsibility, from the dog owner to local authorities, to the MPs and the Prime Minister himself. We live in a country alongside approximately seven million dogs. Whether we like it or not, they are a part of our lives and we owe it to our children, our dogs and ourselves to ensure that we have the tools necessary to achieve a healthy, balanced and safe environment for us all. ::

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