

Fatal Dog Attacks: Why Lessons Are Not Being Learned

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Over the weekend another tragedy unfolded in a UK home. A youngster lost her life to a dog.

In Britain, in the year 2010 – people are DYING as a result of attacks from domestic pets. 6 children have died in the past 5 years. And the Government has STILL not had the foresight or inclination to understand that these 6 deaths will NOT be the last unless intelligent, preventative legislation replaces the current, utterly useless, flawed joke of a law we're lumbered with – the 1991 Dangerous Dogs Act. I was going to write something on Monday appealing to anyone who was thinking of contributing to the DEFRA 'public consultation' process to think again.

The RSPCA has confirmed to K9 Magazine that the Government's public 'consultation' actually comes with a rather large caveat – that being, the issue of BSL (breed specific legislation) is OFF the table as a discussion.

The Government wants you to have your say on dangerous dogs laws but it WON'T consider a repeal to the most bitterly complained about element of that law.

The RSPCA told us:

The RSPCA remains firmly opposed to breed specific legislation. The Society believes that dog control legislation should focus on the intentions of the owner rather than solely on the breed or type of dog involved. Any dog can be made dangerous if owned by an irresponsible owner.

As an animal welfare charity dedicated to preventing cruelty we feel strongly that it is completely wrong that types of dog should be persecuted simply on the basis of their appearance. These animals are often victims of cruelty themselves because of their irresponsible owners.

All high level politicians from all the major political parties, along with law enforcement bodies, have however **made it clear they will not consider withdrawing the ban on types of dog currently outlawed.**

Despite this we will be forwarding proposals to the law makers that would make it easier and quicker to exempt currently banned types if they are suitable, as well as rehome dogs that have been properly behaviourally assessed with suitable owners.

The RSPCA has been working with the police and local authorities to develop proposals that place the focus of legislation on the owner's intentions. It does currently include an amended breed specific aspect as police and politicians felt public safety must be protected. However the RSPCA has ensured greater welfare considerations are at the core of this and the rest of the proposals.

The Society sees this as a step in right direction, but our opposition to breed specific legislation remains and we will hope these changes will lead to a day when section 1 can be repealed.

It is entirely flawed that the law should focus on the types of dog, rather than irresponsible owners who should always be the target of any dog control legislation.

The new draft Bill the Society has been working on places the focus on the actions and intentions of the owner, rather than the breed or type of dog. It should have a preventative effect much like the Animal Welfare Act which is ultimately what all animal charities want to achieve.

(My emphasis, above)

So, The RSPCA has confirmed what was a pretty open secret; the Government wants to look like it's listening to public opinion on dangerous dogs laws, but it's actually made it's mind up already on one of the biggest, most fundamental flaws of the act.

As the RSPCA cites its opposition to BSL, it is joined by countless other organisations involved in dogs – the Kennel Club, The Dogs Trust, The BVA, The Mayhew Animal Home – I could go on, but don't feel I need to say any more than this: The Government is PRETENDING to consult. In reality, it's clearly already got terms and conditions in place, but just hasn't had the courtesy or integrity to let people know.

I believe in consultation as a means to resolve problems and I believe we need new dangerous dog laws. But if I walked in to a meeting to discuss the issue and was immediately told "Sorry, we can discuss the DDA but BSL is not on the agenda", I'd turn around walk away. Such a process lacks honesty and integrity if you happen to believe that BSL is one of the biggest problems within the law that's being 'consulted' on.

We'd have nothing to consult over if one side isn't prepared to listen to the collective voices of animal welfare and other canine organisations. Why, we must ask, do the Government think they know best with regard to dangerous dogs laws, in the face of overwhelming opposition to section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act from the organisations who work with dogs and dog owners day in day out? Why does the Government pretend to be 'consulting' when it hasn't actually told people the real deal on the terms of that consultation? Does the Government think the police know more about this issue? With respect, or without – I'm not really fussed – but what do the police know about dogs? They know about crime, criminals and the law – they're not animal behaviour experts.

So, if you were thinking of consulting with DEFRA, and BSL was one of your key points of opposition, you're wasting your time it would seem. I'd suggest the process is a sham and I for one will have absolutely no part of it and will publicly question its legitimacy and findings, given what we now know thanks to the RSPCA.

And what we DO know should ALWAYS be a basis for what we do, rather than taking action based on what we THINK we know.

Here's why.

What we *think* we know is that there are certain ‘types’ of dog owners who have certain *types* of dogs that are the source of the UK’s dangerous dogs problem.

Hoodies? Status dogs? Weapon dogs? Street gangs? Drug dealers?

Well, that’s what some – ill informed, misguided types – *think* we know. Are they a problem? Absolutely. But we can categorise them a lot easier if we just accept this – a bad dog owner is a bad dog owner not because of who they are, what they look like or what they do for a living, but because of how they treat, train and use their dogs. Nothing else.

If a dog is trained to protect a drug dealer, he’s a guard dog. So if all dogs that have been encouraged to guard their owners/families are now to be categorised as ‘weapon’ dogs then we have a lot of weapon dogs in the UK.

Here’s an idea. If someone is a drug dealer, they’re a criminal. Get them off the streets. If someone is out terrorising members of the public or fellow criminals with a ‘weapon’ dog, here’s an idea – they’re ALREADY breaking the law. Get them off the streets.

So, what DO we know?

Take a look:

Cadey-Lee Deacon: Killed at her grandparent’s home by two dogs (Rottweilers) when the dog’s owner was not present. The death took place at the home where the dog’s lived. The family home.

Ellie Lawrenson: Killed at her grandmother’s home while under the supervision of her grandmother. The dog’s (Pit Bull) owner was not present at the time of the attack. The attack took place at the place where the dog lived. The family home.

Archie-Lee Hirst: Killed at his grandparent’s home while under the supervision of someone who was not the dog’s (Rottweiler) owner. The attack took place at the dog’s home, the family home, in the yard outside but the dog’s owner was not present at the time of the fatal attack.

Jaden Mack: Killed at his grandmother’s home whilst his grandmother (the dog’s owner) fell asleep, giving the dogs (Staffordshire Bull Terrier and Jack Russell Terrier) unrestricted access to the child who himself had been left on a table. The fatal attack took place at the dog’s (family) home whilst, in the same building, the dog’s owner was not physically present at the time of the attack (as she was sleeping).

John Paul Massey was killed by his uncle’s dog (Pit Bull) whilst in the care of his grandmother. The attack took place at the family home, the place where the dog lived. The dog’s owner was not present at the time of the attack.

Yesterday, an 18-month old girl lost her life to a dog (thought at time of writing to be an American Bulldog) that belonged to her Uncle. The dog’s owner was not present at the time of the attack which took place in the family home where the dog lived.

Breeds involved:

Rottweiler (x2 in Cadey Lee Deacon's case, 1 in Archie Lee Hirst)

Pit Bull – Ellie Lawrenson / John Paul Massey

Staffordshire Bull Terrier and Jack Russell Terrier – Jaden Mack

American Bulldog (yesterday, as yet not confirmed)

So, 6 fatal dog attacks and 6 remarkably similar circumstances – attacks ALL happened at the location where the dog lived (dog's family home) and in ALL cases the owner of the dog was NOT present at the time of the attack taking place.

These are the facts.

It's not 'status dogs' or 'hoodies' or any one particular breed of dog that is responsible for killing people. It's a lack of awareness about how dogs behave, think and react in particular circumstances. Family dogs in family homes are responsible for these 6 fatal dog attacks.

I'll briefly touch on something from personal experience.

I have two dogs. One of those dogs gets very stressed (and I use the word advisedly) when either myself or my wife leaves the house, even for a short time. If we both leave, she settles down quickly and understands the routine involved, but if ONE of us leaves, she gets agitated, runs from room to room, stares out of the windows, paws at the doors and gets herself in to a generally unhappy state. No amount of consoling or attempts to distract her will do the trick until the family is all back together as one unit. Interestingly, my other dog does not do this. She is calm and balanced and doesn't seem to care when people come and go, whether it's me or my wife.

All dogs have their own individual personalities.

Forget breed traits for a moment (and please don't think for a second that I am ignoring the importance of genetics and breeding in what makes a particular dog tick) and think about this: regardless of who the dog's parents and grandparents happen to be, their individual personality is shaped by a hugely diverse spectrum of other, environmental factors.

My Labrador and my Rottweiler have been given very, very (almost identical) upbringings – yet one of my dogs gets incredibly agitated when either myself or my wife leaves the home and the other doesn't care. One of my dogs is particularly fond of meeting children, one is indifferent to them. One of my dogs welcomes people who visit my home wearing a uniform with a wagging tail, the other wants to send them packing.

If you were to ask me whether I thought it'd be OK for me (or my wife) to go out and leave my dogs in the care of someone who wasn't their owner whilst children would be present, I'd say no. Conclusively no. No. No. Not happening. No.

I'm NOT being wise after the event. I'm not being a smart Alec.

Do I 'trust' my dogs?

No! Of course I don't. They're dogs. I especially don't 'trust' my dogs if I'm not even there. Placing trust in one's dog to not eat a sausage during a training exercise is fine. Trusting a dog to behave EXACTLY how you think it'll behave when you're not there, isn't. There's no real upside to such a bet. The upside, if there is one, is; nothing bad happens. The potential downside...doesn't bear thinking about.

Think about this; have you ever been to someone's home where there's a dog and the dog's owner is not there? The person who feeds the dog, trains the dog, can CONTROL the dog is away and the dog's been left with someone who, whilst they may know the dog, doesn't real have the same connection with it as the owner? I have. And it can be quite an interesting experience. A dog that spends a few hours 'acting up' or being naughty/aggressive/unruly/unpleasant to be around suddenly turns in to sappy, obedient puppy the minute they're reunited with their master.

I'll relate a true story about the most dangerous dog I've ever encountered.

My (now) wife worked at a quarantine kennels for a while. I worked at kennels in the next county as a dog trainer. We were both experienced working in kennels and, as anyone who's worked in kennels will know, you get to see ALL elements of canine behaviour. Dogs are placed in a different setting and their owners removed from the environment and it's then that you get to see which dogs are happy to be without their owners but perhaps get upset at being in a strange, funny smelling, noisy environment.

You get to see which dogs just pine and pine for their missing friends. You get to see which dogs have been well trained and, despite not being happy, will still comply with commands even from a stranger. You get to see which dogs are perfectly friendly but have clearly never been taught a basic command in their lives. You get to see which dogs absolutely LOVE being in such a dog-filled environment and don't seem to give two hoots about their owners not being there. You get to see other people's dogs behaving in all manners of ways.

In all of this, I can safely say the type of BREED happens to be utterly, utterly irrelevant in relation to how the dog reacts to this environment. No two Dobermans act the same, no two German Shepherds react the same way and you'll find you're just as likely to get a bite from a Labrador or a Border Collie as you are from a Rottweiler or a Bull breed.

The most dangerous dog I EVER encountered was, as it happens, a Border Collie.

My (now) wife called me to let me know that a dog had come in the quarantine kennels but he was actually a boarder rather than a quarantined dog.

She told me the dog was launching itself at kennel staff from his kennel and that nobody had been able to get close to entering his kennel. (Bear in mind, these are experienced kennel staff, used to working with many different dogs in a quarantine environment).

I was asked whether I could come over and take a look at the dog and see if I could get in to his kennel and calm him down and get him to be a bit happier and a little less bitey.

A Border Collie? I thought. How bad can it be?

Jumping at the chance to act the hero, I drove over and went to see the dog.

Firstly, this was the largest Border Collie I've ever seen. He was (intact male) easily bigger than the Rottweiler I currently own. He was big and he was very, very (VERY) hostile.

Just walking up to his kennel, he flung himself to the front, made himself big and gave a display that could not be mistaken for anything other than extreme territorial aggression.

He was in a confined space and he wanted everyone to know that, if you entered it, he'd be willing to bite. Not just nip and retreat, bite, bite and bite some more. To say he meant business would be an understatement.

I spent a lot of time trying all manner of approaches. I tried the friendly approach. The food through the kennel approach. The pick a ball up and see if that interested him approach. The submissive approach. The assertive approach. The downright hostile approach. I tried everything I knew – and I have worked with a number of rehabilitation case dogs who were very aggressive – but absolutely nothing worked. This was a dog that would not be subdued, at all.

I admitted I couldn't really help in terms of getting close with the dog and advised that, for the duration of his short stay at the kennels, the staff would be best advised to use the built in, sliding kennel partition so as to ensure the dog was never allowed to come in to contact with a person.

I've worked with more than 2,000 dogs and would like to think I have a reasonably fair ability at calling a dog's personality. I'll confidently go on record and say that I believe this dog had the capacity to kill. He REALLY meant business.

But here's where the story reaches its point.

When that dog's owner came to collect him, he turned in to the soppiest, most playful, friendly dog you could ever wish to meet. He just melted. His tail wagged, his ears set back, his hostile "I'll kill you if you so much as come within an inch of my kennel" personality just dissolved. As fast as that. The SECOND his owner came for him, he changed.

Was he a dangerous dog?

Well, I think I already called that. He WAS the most dangerous dog I ever met. Ever. UNTIL his owner turned up, whereupon he instantly became a different dog. His personality changed like the flick of a switch.

Did he have the capacity to attack and seriously injure (possibly kill) someone? I have absolutely NO doubt that he did. But again, there's a caveat – he became a snarling, hostile dog when his owner was not there and he found himself confronted by people he didn't know. WHEN his owner was there, he'd lie on his back to have his belly tickled by all. What a nice dog, you'd think. But a more accurate way of putting it would be; what a nice, friendly dog (when his owner's around), what a completely unhinged, dangerous creature (when his owner wasn't about).

We've lost 6 children in under 5 years to dog attack in the UK. We must all agree, that's 6 too many.

In ALL cases, circumstance was far, far more pertinent than the 'type' of owner or even the 'type' of dog.

What is missing is education and awareness. A distinct lack of understanding as to the risks associated with unattended dogs, children and an owner not present.

Whilst we have constant debates about so-called 'status dogs' and trying to define a breed as being dangerous based entirely on what that breed happens to look like or who its parents were, we can – tragically – expect more of the same. More deaths, more ignorance – and that's ignorance condoned by the Government.

As a nation, we must surely accept that we would ALL be better off if dog owners were more dog aware.

Not *some* owners. Not certain *types* of owners or owners of certain *types* of dogs, all dog owners. If all dog owners knew more about dogs and what makes dogs dogs, we'd benefit. All of us. Dog owner or not.

What we have here is a people problem, not a dog problem. People who are not fully aware of how dogs brains work.

Dogs CAN grow up with children and be an exceptionally positive influence on youngsters, but a simple lack of awareness about what circumstances can lead to tragedies as a result of dogs doing what dogs are capable of doing is what's costing youngsters their very existence on this planet and it is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Our current law doesn't work.

The question is, will the Government be intelligent enough to recognise that fiddling around the edges of a bad law will not provide the answers we need? That focussing on 'types' of owners or dogs won't prevent deaths? Or that the problem of 'killer' dogs is by no means confined to the mean streets of the UK, but – in fact – is most likely to manifest itself in a family home with a family dog, being cared for by grandma whilst the dog owner happens to be somewhere else.

This isn't what we *think* might be true. This is what we KNOW to be true.

It's time for the Government to come clean on the DEFRA consultation and acknowledge what the RSPCA have confirmed; that they've already made their mind up regarding key aspects of dangerous dogs legislation.

No breed bans.

No BSL.

No BS!

Education is the answer.