How to Respond to a Dog Bite Incident

The following is a Press Kit prepared by the American Rottweiler Club to help local clubs and individuals respond to the negative publicity associated with a dog bite incident. Please feel free to use this information, but please credit the American Rottweiler Club when you do.

HOW TO RESPOND TO A DOG BITE INCIDENT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

A PRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN ROTTWEILER CLUB© 2/1/94

Introduction to the ARC Press Kit

It is an unfortunate sign of our times that The American Rottweiler Club has been faced with the difficult task of educating our membership on how to deal with the press following a dog bite incident. This Kit is designed to help you in the event that you are faced with such an incident in your community.

Please take the time to review it now, and discuss the issues raised with your friends and fellow club members before something happens.

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For More Information or Assistance, contact:

Emergency Response Chairman
Jeanette Quay, Chair    jquay@ouraynet.com

What You Can Do Before an Incident Occurs

Become visible in your community. Participate in parades, pet fairs, and any other activity that highlights dogs. Hold obedience, agility, and Canine Good Citizen events. Invite the local press. If they can't come, send them a press release on the event. The time to get your name in their files is before something happens.

Build a relationship with the local chapter of the Humane Society. Like it or not, the Humane Society is typically the first group called when there is an incident. They have done an outstanding public relations job. If you have developed a good relationship with them, they may refer calls to you. They may also give the press some good quotes regarding our breed, if they know some good dogs and good people.

Get to know the local dog trainers and animal behaviorists. These people are also visible in the community and may be called. They make good copy, and are often more believable because they are not tied to any particular breed. If something later happens, these are the people who are more believable on the issue of animal behavior, especially for television interviews.

Appoint two people in your club to field questions if an incident occurs. No matter how much you may know
about Rottweilers, not many of us know how to respond to the press. The people appointed to respond to questions ideally should have some experience at "being on the hot seat." If you have lawyers, sales people, business executives, press them into service. This is one time that the President or other officers of the club may not be the best choices to speak to the press. Keep in mind that the people asking questions know virtually nothing about Rottweilers, but know how to get a sensational story.

Distribute this kit to those designated to respond. Have them read and review it and keep a copy at their offices and home. *Never, never talk to a reporter without these written materials in front of you.* Speak directly from the provided press release, and you are less likely to be surprised at what you read.

Do some role playing. At your next club meeting, designate some members as reporters and some as club representatives. Ask difficult, inflammatory questions. Try it first without the printed materials in front of the representatives, and then again with them having the materials to use. Videotape the session if possible.

Make sure the American Rottweiler Club secretary has the names and telephone numbers (daytime and evening) of someone in your club to contact. Many reporters will call the AKC to get a contact, and they give the ARC secretary as the contact for the breed. We must have current information to quickly put you in touch with the people seeking information.

Practice what you preach. The best way to diffuse anti-Rottweiler sentiment is to do all those things that we say these dogs can do. Work your dogs in obedience, tracking, carting, agility, therapy programs. Enter them in parades, pet fairs, take them to the local pet food store. BE RESPONSIBLE.

**There is an Incident - What do you do?**

Locate your ARC press kit. Do not talk to any reporters until you have some information in front of you to work with.

Prepare a press release. Even if you do not send out the release, it will help you organize your thoughts and put the incident in perspective.

What do you put in the press release? The form of Press Release provided in this kit must be followed, or the press will not use it. The release must state "Press Release" at the top. It must be double spaced, and no longer than two pages. It must include the name and daytime phone number of a contact person, and the date of the release. The form we have provided can even be cut and pasted for your use. Just add your club's name, the contact person, and a one line "descriptive header". This should be a one line synopsis that references the incident being addressed. For example, "Dog attack results in injuries to two Springfield women."

What do you do with the press release? The press release is an effective tool to help organize your thoughts. But, before you send it, assess the situation. Will the release help? What is the focus of the reports now being made? Do you want to change that focus? Once the reports are focused on Rottweilers, remember the tools that the press has at its fingertips. They will know exactly how many attacks have occurred across the country, and when. Once you have made the decision to send the press release, address it to the reporter who is covering the story, or to "News Editor" if you do not have a name. Call the media and get a fax number. Fax it to them.

Should you give an interview? Once you send the press release, you are inviting an interview. Typically, you will be contacted by telephone. Telephone interviews are, by far, the safest course. Refer to ARC's Tips for Dealing with the Media.

What if I am asked for an on camera interview? Decline. Offer to the press the name of a local animal behavior specialist, humane society official (who is supportive of the breed), or respected dog trainer to speak on dog behavior in general. This approach will also save you considerable pain and aggravation. Imagine yourself on camera, and the reporter asks "So, why are Rottweilers killing and maiming children all over the country?" Do you honestly think you could keep your composure in the strange setting you find yourself? Play it safe, decline on camera interviews.
Call the President and Secretary of the ARC. We get calls from all over the country when an incident occurs. We would rather hear about it from you than be surprised by a reporter's call. If you do not have anyone in your local club who is willing to talk with the press, let us know.

Keep a cool head! Your first instinct will be to defend your beloved Rottweilers. That is to be expected, but it will hurt your credibility. Focus on the bigger problem - irresponsible breeders and owners.

**Tips for Dealing with the Media**

Have a press release in front of you to refer to for answers. Most contact with the press will be by telephone. If you have a press release, or a fact sheet, such as ARC's Introduction to the Rottweiler, to refer to for your answers, you will not be as surprised by what you read.

Do not dodge the issue. The press does not want to hear what is good about Rottweilers, they want to know why this happened. It happened because of irresponsible breeders/owners. Here is your chance to tell your story.

Keep all answers brief and to the point. Remember that the press is there to get a story - a sensational story if possible. They will try to use your words against you. The more you say, the more likely they will find something to use out of context.

When you have finished your answer, wait for the reporter to ask you the next question, regardless of how long you have to wait. People are uncomfortable with silence, a fact used by reporters to try and get you to expand your answer. Do not fall into this trap. It is not your job to keep the dialogue moving.

Do not repeat negative or inflammatory words used by reporters to answer their questions. The reporter will be trying to portray you and the Rottweiler in the light they want. Do not allow that to happen. Define yourself and define your position by using words that you want to use.

Do not be afraid to say, "No Comment." Reporters are trained to pursue the answers they want to hear. They may rephrase a question several times to try and throw you off and get you to respond. If you are uncomfortable with the question, and think there is no good answer, No Comment is probably the right response.

Stay on the offensive. Never let your guard down. The trick to doing this successfully is to use a transitional phrase, such as "There is a larger issue here ......"The issue is responsible ownership ...... "The problem is irresponsible owners and breeders..." etc. to bring the conversation back to your agenda.

**Your Specific Message:**

Develop a series of message points and implement them when answering all questions. It is imperative to have your own agenda of just a couple of key points that you keep hammering home, regardless of the questions asked. Repeat them, keep coming back to them, do not waver from them.

The Rottweiler has a distinguished heritage as a working dog, dedicated to serving man. In his early existence, he drove herds of cattle and pulled man's carts. In recent times he has served man in search and rescue work, as a therapy dog, as a herding dog and as a companion animal. It is because of the inherent mental stability of the Rottweiler that he has proved so useful and versatile to man.

The AKC has registered over 180,000 Rottweilers in the last two years. These dogs have provided their owners with countless hours of enjoyment. The number of unfortunate incidents is extremely rare.

**Actual Questions and Answers:**

Why are Rottweilers killing and maiming babies all over the country? (This was actually the first question asked by a reporter following a fatality.)
"The problem is people, irresponsible breeders and owners." You can't deny the facts expressed in the question, so deal with them in your way. Make your first comment count, take control and steer the interview to tell your story.

Why are Rottweilers involved in dog attacks more than other breeds?

Answer: Rottweilers are a very popular breed and anytime a breed has this type popularity, there are more incidents because there are more of this type of dog. When you look at the large number, the actual percentage of incidents is low.

Why have Rottweilers become so popular?

Answer: Two reasons, first, the breed is extremely adaptable and when well-bred and trained make wonderful companions. Second, it is sad, but true that the Rottweiler has become the "guard dog of the moment." Many unscrupulous breeders are preying upon this attitude and breeding dogs with no regard as to temperament and proper placement of the dogs. (You have now given the reporter another story, the guard businesses and commercial breeders.)

Why doesn't your group do something about these guard schools and puppy mills? Or can you?

Answer: Yes we can, with your help we can educate the public about this breed, and all dogs, as to how to properly train and socialize them. (One reporter backed away from this one in a hurry, but what a great opportunity if a follow up question were asked.)

Are Rottweilers easier to guard train than other breeds, such as the German Shepherd? Answer: I do not believe that any dog should be guard trained. (Do not get trapped into comparing Rottweilers with other breeds.)

Why would you even take the risk of owning a dog that might hurt you?

Answer: A properly bred, socialized, supervised and trained Rottweiler is not a threat to its family.

Why did this attack occur?

Answer: I was not there, so there is no way I can answer that specific question. However, most attacks occur due to improper training, socialization, or the circumstances the animal is placed in. For example, two or more dogs unsupervised together may form a pack, and in a sense, revert back to more instinctual behavior. Small children often exhibit the quick, erratic movements that will trigger an animal's "prey drive." We, at all times, must remember that these are animals we are dealing with, and act accordingly

What do you think of the "Good Dog Carl" books? Do you think they portray an accurate picture of Rottweilers?

Answer: "Good Dog Carl" is a children's story, a fantasy. It is not intended to portray an accurate depiction of Rottweilers, children, or their mothers. How many mothers do you know who go shopping and leave their infant children home unattended?

(Form) PRESS RELEASE

[Insert the name of your Rottweiler club here]

Contact:

Phone:

FAX:
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[INSERT YOUR ONE LINE DESCRIPTION HERE] We have received many inquiries from individuals concerned over whether the Rottweiler is a dangerous dog. It is important to recognize that a dog, any breed of dog, is the result of his training, socialization, and the environment he has been placed in. The Rottweiler is an ancient breed of German origin that has served man nobly for centuries, primarily as a herding and carting dog. In more recent times, the dog has been used for therapy work, tracking, herding, police work, and primarily as a companion animal. It is only within recent years that the Rottweiler has emerged as the "guard dog of the moment", and experienced the overpopulation that comes with this recognition.

The Rottweiler is a large breed of dog, with females weighing up to 100 pounds, and males weighing up to 135. They are stocky and muscular, and noted for their great strength, typical of a carting breed of dog. In temperament, they can range from outgoing, happy dogs to more reserved, aloof dogs. They can be quite stubborn and require obedience training and family socialization at an early age. This is not a breed of dog that does well in kennel situations, and aggression should never be encouraged. Aggressiveness varies with the individual dog, and many have been known to bully their owners. This can be prevented with early obedience training, and proper socialization. Rottweilers, no matter how docile, should never be left alone with small children as they can seriously injure a child by simply bumping into them or stepping on them. Because of their size, Rottweilers are not recommended by many breeders for homes with small children or elderly family members.

Rottweilers are one of the most popular breeds in the country. This popularity has led to many good things, such as the use of Rottweilers in search and rescue and therapy programs. There are many Rottweilers now serving in local hospitals and nursing homes as therapy dogs, where they interact with and entertain the patients. In the San Francisco earthquakes, a Rottweiler saved the life of a neighbor's child by jumping through a window and shielding her from falling debris. Another Rottweiler saved the life of her wheelchair bound owner by pulling her from a burning van. Rottweilers are being used with great success in search and rescue programs, and as trained police dogs.

However, the popularity of the breed has also led to prolific breeding of Rottweilers by uninformed people who are breeding to make a buck. Many of these so-called "breeders" are nothing more than commercial establishments specializing in breeding aggressive or attack dogs. They are preying upon the public's desire for a guard dog, and are paying little or no attention to the mental and physical health of the animals they are producing. Many families purchase these dogs for protection, and then discover that ownership brings with it considerable responsibility. The decision to purchase a Rottweiler should be made only after careful study, paying particular attention to the suitability of the breed to each person's circumstances. Any Rottweiler purchased as a pet should be spayed or neutered.

If you would like additional information on the breed, please call [insert the name of your designated club contact] at the number listed,

[Insert Date of Issue --]

ACTUAL PRESS RELEASE FROM 2005

American Rottweiler Club
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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DOG ATTACK ON CHILDREN IN BOSTON AREA

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Almost 100,000 Rottweilers will be registered with the American Kennel Club this year. Five years ago, only 40,000 a year were being registered. It is now the second most popular breed in the country. This popularity has led to many good things, such as the use of Rottweilers in search and rescue and therapy programs. There are many Rottweilers now serving in local hospitals and nursing homes as therapy dogs, where they interact with and entertain the patients. In the San Francisco earthquakes, a Rottweiler saved the life of a neighbor's child by jumping through a window and shielding her from falling debris. Another Rottweiler saved the life of her wheelchair bound owner by pulling her from a burning van last year. Rottweilers are being used with great success in search and rescue programs, and as trained police dogs.

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