

**Out of the Mouths of Babes**  
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In the Bible it states “And a child shall lead them.” How true this is. Honestly, I do not feel we give many children enough credit. We tend to lump them into one big group and fail to see that they are individuals. As with anything, we base our opinions of the whole upon the actions of a few. Sadly, the few we base the actions of the whole on are almost always the troublemakers. This is wrong, so very wrong. But humans tend to do the same with any age group, any race, any religion and many species of other animals. When I began The Safe Kids/Safe Dogs Project over a year ago, I knew I would learn quite a bit from the people I presented to – especially the children. Children learn from us. Their fears, hopes, dreams, perceptions come one way or another from the adults influencing them. The children either want to be like us or are so disgusted that they do all they can to be different. Some children follow the wrong paths while others become children to look up to and admire. Children are also far more perceptive than we give them credit for.

When I begin a Safe Kids/Safe Dogs presentation, one of the first questions I ask is: “What dog is the most dangerous?” or “What dog are you most likely to be bitten by?” Statistically, a child is more likely to be bitten by a dog they, a friend or relative own. 75-85% of all reported bites occur from a dog known to the child. This number could be higher as many dog bites go unreported. The media wants us to think our children are at risk from Pit Bulls, Rottweilers, German Shepherds, etc. Parents also teach their kids that certain breeds are perfectly safe and others would kill them if given the chance. Often through a total lack of understanding of dogs and dog safety, parents teach their children this erroneous idea. In reality, the most dangerous dog is the one that is poorly trained and socialized – regardless of the breed or cross. It is incorrect concepts that lead to restrictions and even bans being placed on certain breeds.

Most often, my presentations are given to middle and upper-middle class suburban children. When I ask the question what dogs is the most dangerous I will almost always get the standard answers of “Pit bulls and Rottweilers.” Sometimes there will be an Akita, Doberman, or “Police dog” (German Shepherd) tossed in. When I ask what are the safest I almost always get “Golden Retrievers, Cocker Spaniels, Collies and Labrador Retrievers.” When I ask why they think this way, the answers range from “My (fill in relative) said so,” “Because the only dog on my street that is bad is a Pit Bull so they are a bad dog,” to “It is what I see on TV.” I pretty much expect these answers now. Ironically, when I ask what children a dog has ever bitten and what type of dog was it, an assumed dangerous breed as of the time this is being written had bitten only one child of the hundreds I presented to that first year alone. Dogs assumed to be safe breeds by the undereducated general public had bitten more children.

In November of 2002, I was invited to present to an after school program for at-risk city kids. They were elementary school age. I entered with my two presentation dogs: a

Shetland Sheepdog and a Great Pyrenees. We introduced ourselves and I began asking my opening questions. When I asked what dogs are the most dangerous, I was shocked! The answers were: Chihuahuas, Poodles (all sizes), and various “fuzzy lap dogs.” One child did say Pit Bulls. No sooner did he get that out and the others jumped on him verbally! I asked why the kids answered smaller dogs. One boy piped up with “Because little old ladies own them. All the ones in my apartment building are nasty and bite!” When I asked why most of them got angry when they heard a friend say “Pit Bulls,” most of the kids said bad people owned the only bad dogs of these breeds. Many of these children came from families with or had relatives with these dogs often labeled dangerous. These children were able to make the connection that in the good homes the dogs (the pits) were fine. When in the bad homes, the dogs could be dangerous. When I suggested that maybe the owners of the little dogs were not good owners because they did not teach their dogs manners, these children better understood this concept. Dogs are a reflection of the owners – regardless of what breed. Dogs in good homes are better behaved and safer than dogs in bad home.

Out of the mouths of babes. If only more adults could have the insight these city children did. Maybe then there would be less call for breed specific laws and more call for targeting the owners.

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