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THE JOURNAL NEWS

(Original publication: June 27, 2006)

AIRMONT — Kerry Potter-Kotecki stood before 36 second-graders in Cherry Lane Elementary School and talked about a subject most children love — dogs.

But her take on the subject was a little different. Potter-Kotecki, a Montebello mother of three, was teaching the 7-year-olds last week how to prevent dog bites by reading dogs' body language to determine if they wanted to be approached or petted.

Her advice: If a dog seems aggressive or frisky, stand still like a tree.

"I tell them they are going to be dog detectives," said Potter-Kotecki, 38, who has been teaching the "Doggone Safe Be a Tree" dog-bite prevention program to elementary school children for a year. "I tell them dogs give clues, that dogs will let them know when they want to be left alone."

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, 4.7 million Americans will be bitten by dogs this year, most of them children. Each year, about 800,000 people require medical treatment for dog bites and 12 die in dog attacks. Insurance companies pay more than \$345 million in dog-bite liability claims a year.

The association and the U.S. Postal Service believe that dog bites are one of the nation's most commonly reported childhood public-health problems.

Potter-Kotecki, vice president of Canada-based Doggone Safe Inc., isn't going by statistics alone when she says that the Be a Tree program should be part of the safety curriculum in all schools, just like the fire-safety drill.

Four years ago, Potter-Kotecki's daughter, Haley, then 5, was attacked by a 65-pound Rottweiler and four pugs. The dogs, who belonged to a neighbor, entered Potter-Kotecki's yard and mauled Haley, leaving her seriously injured with close to 100 bites and a punctured trachea.



Kathy Gardner/The Journal News

Kerry Potter-Kotecki of Suffern coaches second-grade students at Cherry Lane Elementary School in Airmont on how to tell if a dog is friendly. Potter, whose child was mauled by dogs, is vice president of Doggone Safe, an organization that teaches children about canine safety.

Safety tips

Three things to teach your children

- Dogs don't like hugs and kisses. Face-to-face contact is a common cause for bites.
- Be a tree if a strange dog approaches. A tree is boring, and a dog will eventually go away.
- Never tease a dog, and never disturb a sleeping dog or one that is protecting something.

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Haley spent a month in intensive care and had surgery on dog-bite wounds on her neck, face, head, upper body and arms.

During Haley's recovery, Potter-Kotecki discovered a dog-bite support group on the Internet. She joined the group, which eventually led her to Doggone Safe. The nonprofit organization had been created on the recommendation of jurors following the 1998 mauling death of 8-year-old Courtney Trempe in Ontario, Canada.

Today, Potter-Kotecki spends her free time visiting schools to teach the Be a Tree program.

Armed with a large stuffed golden retriever and pictures, she tells children that dogs licking their chops, yawning or lifting their paws are not safe to approach. Also, dogs whose tails are pointed high or low between their legs are not safe.

A happy dog, on the other hand, she says, is a panting dog with his tail wagging in the middle.

"Any dog can bite. Everyone gets caught up in the breed," said Potter-Kotecki. "By being a tree, the dog leaves them alone. They can do that if there is a dog loose and is frightening them."

Though the Be a Tree program is currently available only in Rockland, she is looking to expand it in Westchester and other neighboring areas as well if there is a demand, she said.

Dr. Patricia Collins of the Valley Cottage Animal Hospital said the training was important for children. Dogs bite when they feel threatened. If they are with other dogs, they develop a pack mentality, much like street gangs among humans.

"You can teach children more consistently than you can teach dogs," said Collins, a vet at the hospital for 14 years. "Dogs are very, very loving, but people should remember that they are not little people in fur suits. They will always act at times like a true animal and not have human feelings that a little child is defenseless. They operate very instinctively. In the right situation, even a sweet breed can cause harm."

At Cherry Hill, the children responded wonderfully to the program, Principal Janice Hurewitz said.

"My concern was that children would get frightened by it. But she presented things in such a nonthreatening way," Hurewitz said. "I would bring the program back without hesitation. The children got a great deal out of it."

In the last year, Potter-Kotecki has gone to four of the five Ramapo Central elementary schools. She hopes to take the program countywide in the coming year.

"I really feel it will make a difference," Potter-Kotecki said. "That drives me. If being a tree helps save one life, it's worth it."