

PETS/SAFETY

Once BITTEN, twice SHY



Tonja Stewart of Holyrood teaches school children how to interact safely with dogs.

DANETTE DOOLEY/SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

Program teaches kids how to stay safe around dogs

BY DANETTE DOOLEY
 Special to The Telegram

Tonja Stewart of Holyrood combines her experience as an elementary school teacher with her expertise as a dog trainer and behaviour consultant to help children learn how to protect themselves against dog bites.

"When I do this program, it's right up my alley," Stewart said of the Be a Tree program she takes into the schools.

Stewart and her husband Robert are both from Nova Scotia. They moved to Newfoundland about a decade ago when Robert was transferred with the RCMP. He's since left the force and is a high school teacher at Holy Spirit in Conception Bay South.

Stewart is the eastern Canadian representative for Doggone Safe and offers the dog bite prevention program through that non-profit corporation, which is dedicated to dog bite prevention education and victim support.

This is Dog Bite Prevention Week (May 21-27). According to Stewart, the program she delivers is unique in that it uses positive messages and fun activities to give children the information they need to make safe choices around dogs.

Children learn to read dog body language, Stewart said.

"They learn that panting happy dogs may want to meet them, while dogs that are licking their chops, yawning or showing a half moon of white in their eyes do not want to meet them."

As a dog trainer, Stewart studied under world-renowned animal trainers Bob Bailey and the late Dr. Marian Breland-Bailey in Halifax and in their home city of Hot Springs, Ark.

She is a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Pet Dog Trainers (CAPPDT) and is a therapy dog tester/observer with Therapy Dogs Inc.

Doggone Safe does not bring dogs into the classroom, as they distract students from the lessons, Stewart said. Instead, large colourful posters of dogs are used as teaching aids.

Teaching children how to know which dogs they can approach and what to do when they encounter a friendly or dangerous dog is what the program is all about.

Children learn to Be a Tree if a strange dog approaches or any dog is threatening or frightening them or becoming too frisky, she said.

"I teach them to fold their hands in front, to look at their feet and watch their roots grow, and to count in their heads to the highest number they know over and over until help



SUBMITTED PHOTO
Children who take part in the program are taught how to stand still like a tree if they find themselves in a situation where a strange dog is approaching or any dog is displaying threatening, frightening or overly frisky behaviour.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A child hugging a dog may make a cute picture, but dogs don't necessarily enjoy it.

comes or the dog goes away."

After learning how to use their own body to keep themselves safe, how to interpret dog body language and how to act in various situations, children practice what they have learned by playing interactive games and acting out scenes.

"Each person plays a part. Pretending to be the dog is always the most coveted role," Stewart said.

Children also learn about "stranger danger" and that they should only ask about petting a dog if they are with an adult and after it's been determined that the dog is safe to approach.

In order to teach children about dog bite prevention, you need to feel passionate about the animals, Stewart said.

Her home in Holyrood, nestled on an acre of land just yards from the ocean, is home to the Stewarts' five dogs: Tallie, Teal, CQ, Piper, and a blind dog named Tuig. There's also a friendly feline named Malachi.

Stewart spends much of her time

walking and training her dogs. It's like having five children, she said.

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— Tonja Stewart on the Be a Tree program

"The dogs finally settle for the evening around 7:30. That's my quiet time," she said.

Stewart got involved with the canine community in this province after she lost both parents to cancer.

"After I lost my mom and I was living here and didn't know anyone, I knew I had to do something to get involved. That's when I got involved with St. John Ambulance Therapy

Dogs," she explained.

She has since branched out on her own and uses her dogs to help others, as well as her own knowledge of dogs to help owners train their pets.

Stewart favours the clicker training approach, which she said offers positive reinforcement to learning and keeps the dog in a happy emotional state during training.

"People think that they have to punish in order to train, but my three therapy dogs have never had a choke chain on their necks," Stewart said.

She has also written a children's book about beagles that she hopes to publish.

"I'm on this crusade to get people to train their dogs the correct way. And I want to do everything I can to make sure children are safe around dogs. That's where the Be a Tree program comes in."

To learn more about the Doggone Safe program, visit website www.doggone-safe.com or www.caninecompany.ca or call Stewart at 709 229-DOGS (3647).

How to spot a dangerous dog

A dangerous dog is...

- Running loose
- Growling, showing his teeth or raising the fur on his back
- Looking worried, with his mouth closed and a half moon of white showing in his eye
- Warning you to stay away by raising his tail high over his back
- Holding his tail between his legs, wagging his tail between his legs, or wagging his tail slowly and way up in the air

SOURCE: DOGGONE SAFE - WWW.DOGGONESAFE.COM

How to be safe around dogs you know

- Dogs don't like hugs and kisses — scratch the sides of their necks instead.
- Play safe games: fetch, tricks, hide and seek, but no tug or chasing games. Ask an adult to play, too.
- Respect the dog's resting place, toys, food and bones.

SOURCE: DOGGONE SAFE - WWW.DOGGONESAFE.COM

