

Safety around Animals

Dogs, Cats, Horses & Other Pets

Animal-related injuries: the statistics

A wide range of animals are potentially dangerous to children. From July 2005 to June 2008 Princess Margaret Hospital ED saw 1,367 animal-related injury presentations. This included:

- 583 bites and stings from insects and spiders
- 542 dog related injuries (bites, knocked over)
- 144 horse related injuries (falls, bites, kicks)
- 29 snake bites
- 24 injuries from marine animals
- 24 bites and scratches from cats
- 9 bite injuries from rodents
- As well as injuries from monkeys, birds, farm animals and dingoes

The majority of animal-related injury presentations to PMH ED are for children under five (37.89%).

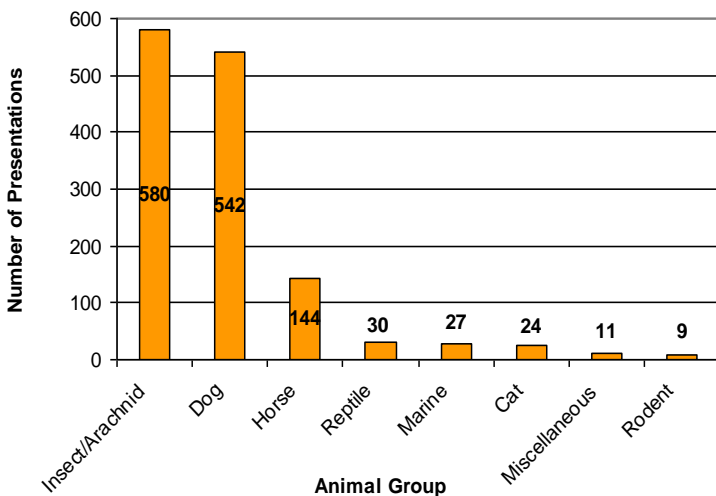
The risk of animal-related injuries is comparable between boys and girls (boys= 53.55%).

Of these presentations, 30.14% were subsequently admitted.

The majority of presentations occur over the summer months (60.65%), while the least occurred during winter (15.73%).

Animal-related injuries are most prevalent over the weekend.

Figure 1: Number of Animal-Related Injury Presentations to PMH ED: July 2005 to June 2008



Why are children at risk?

A number of child-factors make children vulnerable to injuries from animals. They include:

- Small size
- Instability and developing balance
- Inquisitive nature
- Still-developing awareness of self
ie. pressure of touch, loudness of voice
- Inability to assess risk
- Lack of knowledge of how to behave around animals

Pet ownership in Australia

Australia has one of the highest incidences of pet ownership in the world¹:

- Total of 38 million pets
- 63% of households own some kind of pet
- 38% of households own one or more dogs
- 27% of households own one or more cats
- 1% of households own one or more horses
- There are more than 20 million fish and 7.8 million birds kept as pets
- Nearly 3 million small animals such as mice, rabbits and guinea pigs are kept as pets



Benefits of pet ownership & animal interaction

The benefits of pet ownership and child-animal interaction are well documented. These include health benefits such as decreasing the risk of asthma, reducing anxiety and minimising the recovery time from illness and disease².

Pets also encourage physical activity and have immense social and emotional benefits².

For older children, pets can facilitate the learning of responsibility, through the roles of feeding, walking and cleaning up after pets³.

Prevention of animal-related injury

There are 5 key steps to enable positive animal-child interaction:

1. Management strategies for existing pets
2. Careful selection of new pets
3. Training of pets
4. Supervision of children and animals
5. Educating children how to behave around animals

Existing Pets and New Babies

For families that already have a dog or a cat and are expecting a new baby, preparations need to be made well in advance of the baby's arrival⁴. Household pets can often be jealous of a new baby⁴.

- Teach pets to be confined or separated from family when required
- Ensure pets are not demanding of attention
- Ensure pets are in no way aggressive
- Teach pets to have most parts of their body handled
- Obedience training for simple commands is essential

When your new baby arrives⁴:

- Introductions should be made gradually and in a calm controlled manner
- Physical barriers can be useful to separate pets and infants (eg. gates and playpens for dogs, screens and solid doors for cats)
- Still make time for your pet, otherwise they may resent the baby

Selection of New Pets

Pet choice should reflect the family lifestyle, space and time available, level of activity as well as the age of children². No one type or breed is necessarily safe, although certain breeds are known for being better suited to families with children. Discuss pet choice with veterinarians, breeders and trainers before deciding on and purchasing any animal.

Pet Training

Simple obedience training is a vital part of responsible pet ownership. It helps ensure that your child, and other children, will be safe around your pet.

Obedience classes for dogs are run by many organisations in Western Australia. Training should start as soon as you bring a new dog home and formal classes can usually commence once the puppy is 8 weeks old.

Other pets such as cats and horses should also be well trained.

Child and Animal Supervision

Regardless of careful pet selection and training, animals are still unpredictable and supervision of children around pets and other animals is crucial.

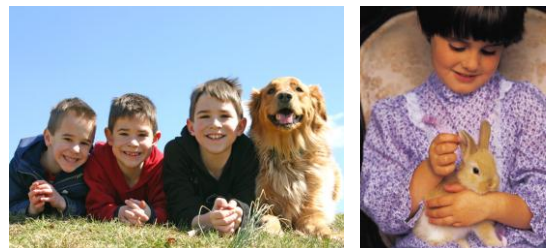
To minimise horse riding injuries, match children to a horse of a suitable size and temperament, ensure equipment is in good condition and that helmets and boots are always worn⁵. Children should receive lessons to ensure they can competently handle the animal in a range of situations⁵.

Insects, spiders, reptiles and marine creatures are part of the environment and will be encountered if outdoors. Be aware that these animals are more active in the warmer months, keep gardens well maintained to eliminate hiding places and use long sleeved clothing, mosquito nets and repellents.

Child Education

When children are older, they should be taught how to handle pets correctly.

- Never approach an unfamiliar dog
- Stay still if an unfamiliar dog approaches you
- Do not look a dog in the eye
- Do not disturb an animal that is eating, sleeping or caring for young
- Move slowly and calmly around animals
- Do not play with an animal unless supervised
- Leave animals alone if they appear agitated



References:

1. Australian Companion Animal Council Inc. 2010. "Pet ownership statistics". Available from: http://www.acac.org.au/pet_care.html
2. McNicholas, J. et al (2008). *Pet ownership and human health: a brief review of evidence and issues*. British Medical Journal. 331: 1252-1254
3. The Safety Centre (2001). *Dogs n Kids [Brochure]*. Parkville
4. Bergman, L. and Gaskins, L. (2008). *Expanding families: preparing for and introducing dogs and cats to infants, children and new vets*. Veterinary Clinics - Small Animal Practice. 38: 1043-1063
5. Christey, G.L., Nelson, D.E. & Rivara, F.P. et al. (1994) *Horseback riding injuries among children and young adults*. In Journal of Family Practice.

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