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## Of Wolves, Wolf Hybrids and Children

By Monty Sloan

In the state of Michigan wolf hybrids are less common than in other states, but they do exist. One such hybrid was kept on a chain in the back yard, but well away from the house. The animal was reportedly 7/8 wolf, although according to one very knowledgeable person who has seen photos and video footage of the animal, he is much lower in wolf content. At best he could be 1/2 wolf. This animal was reportedly good with children and the owners had no reservations about allowing children to play with or around him.

On the 15 of March, 1990, a friend of the animal's owner came over to visit and brought her 2-year-old child. The child had previously "played" with the hybrid and there had been no problems. While the mother was visiting, she put her child into the back yard. Shortly afterward they noticed the animal shaking something -- that something was the child. Most of the throat was torn out; the child was nearly decapitated!

So what happened? How could such a tragedy take place? Wolves, dogs and hybrids all have the potential for killing. It is part of what they, as predators, do for a living. However, with many breeds of dogs we have greatly modified predatory behaviors through centuries of selective breeding. Some breeds such as the livestock guarding dogs (Anatolian shepherds, Italian Maremmas, Great Pyrenees, etc.) show diminished predatory behaviors. Yet the most trustworthy breed, the Maremmas, are only 65% trustworthy with sheep. Other breeds, such as the livestock herding dogs (border collies, German shepherds, etc.) or hunting dogs (pointers, hounds, terriers, poodles, etc.) display various modifications of the complete range of hunting behaviors seen in the wolf.

There are two important things that go into eliciting a response from an animal. One is the threshold, or level, at which the response is triggered, and the other is the intensity of the evoked behavior. When it comes to the wolf, the dog, or the hybrid, and their reactions around livestock, small pets, and even children, it's all a matter of degree to how they will react given a specific situation.

Have you even wondered why children are told never to run around dogs, especially if they are strange dogs? Running is one of the things that elicits or "triggers" predatory behavior. Crudely put, a "trigger mechanism" releases a specific innate (or instinctive) behavioral response to a specific environmental stimulus. Also, there is a specific threshold for the elicitation of the behavior that varies from animal to animal.

There are many examples of such trigger mechanisms in the animal world. With wolves, pups food-begging from adults will trigger regurgitation; a perceived threat to the den, such as by a bear or man, will trigger barking; hearing a distant howl, will trigger howling, and so on. Just from these few examples one can see how we have altered dogs' behaviors through selective breeding. In general, it's much easier to trigger a barking response from dogs, and much harder to trigger

howling, regurgitation, and most importantly, predatory behavior. In the latter case we have either selectively bred against predatory behavior, as in most livestock guarding dogs, or have altered the "threshold" for the elicitation of predatory behavior, as in most other breeds. In fact, the threshold for the elicitation of predatory behavior towards children in many dogs has been raised so high, again through selective breeding, that the likelihood of it ever being evoked is very small. In pure wolves it hasn't been altered at all; hybrids are anybody's guess. Although a wolf hybrid's behavior and appearance will generally fall somewhere between those of a wolf and those of a dog, an individual's behavior can actually be better or worse than either parent.

Selective breeding has also changed the context and intensity of behaviors that are shown. In predatory behavior the usual routine is to give eye, then stalk, chase, catch, kill, and finally eat. Border collies will eye, stalk, chase and then loop back to eye. At least that's the usual and desired routine. (Shepherds get a bit peeved when the border collie kills one of the sheep, which does happen on occasion.) As with border collies, all dogs' predatory behavior has been modified in intensity.

In most breeds, the motivation to hunt has been lowered. A dog that sees a running child may chase it, but even then, it will rarely follow through. Once a wolf is chasing a child (remember we have not done any significant selective breeding on wolves), the likelihood that it will complete the normal sequence is much, much greater than for a dog.

So, can a "pet wolf" be good with children? Well, that depends on what one means by "good". There are many wolf hybrids, and some pure wolves for that matter, that have shown great tolerance and even pleasure in interacting with kids. However, at least in the sense that a dog that is good with children, can be fully trusted with them, a hybrid often cannot, a wolf never so.

The reason you cannot ever trust a pure wolf with children is because of the aforementioned lower threshold for the trigger mechanism regarding predation and the lack of any alteration of their predatory behavior once the trigger is released. Importantly, I must emphasize that these behaviors are genetically encoded -- they cannot be eliminated by "proper socialization" or "training"; at best they can only be suppressed.

As an example of the power of this behavior, at Wolf Park we have a wolf, Imbo, who until he was six years old, was exceptionally good with children. He essentially viewed kids as super puppies -- they would scratch his ears, rub his back, and wouldn't even food beg! Then one day, late in the summer of 1987, Imbo saw a young child throw a tantrum. Imbo watched with interest as this child, about 20 feet away, was on the ground kicking and screaming. Then, only a week later, a child with Tourettes syndrome visited and Imbo watched as she



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flailed her arms about and made interesting noises. Again this was from a distance. Since we only allow wolves to greet children while we walk them on leashes, Imbo had no opportunity to "test" either situation further. Soon after this, we could see a change in Imbo. A friend brought her infant out and laid the child on a blanket within sight of the wolves. A few weeks before, Imbo would have approached the fence, head lowered, ears back -- in a submissive manner as wolves typically do when they are approaching puppies. However, this time it was different. Imbo rushed up, ears pricked, and then ran excitedly back and forth along the fence, as though he were expecting food! It was very clear that Imbo's perception of children had changed, dramatically so -- and this change occurred just through observation. He was simply exposed to the proper releasing stimulus and bang!: what he had treated as wolf pups, he now viewed as prey. Of course his days as a P.R. wolf were over. The important thing to realize is that your pet, or your friend's pet, may change. It may do so very quickly and it may do so with very, very tragic results.

One of the most difficult things to understand, but something that is very important when attempting to understand your pet's behavior, is that the behaviors that we all exhibit, our wolves and ourselves, fall under separate categories and are separately motivated. Just think about it for a moment. Do you know anyone who likes to hunt, or do you even hunt yourself? Do people hunt because they are hungry? Of course not. They hunt because they are separately motivated to do so, and they find the act of hunting reinforcing in and of itself. In other words, people hunt because they enjoy the act of hunting, the results are just a bonus. Wolves are much the same. They don't hunt because they are hungry, nor do they hunt because they are mad at their prey. Wolves hunt, catch, and kill prey, (and prey is often perceived as anything that acts like prey, running, struggling, etc.) simply because that is what wolves do for a living. What all of this means is, a wolf who is very friendly and sociable with people still has the potential of attacking if the proper trigger is released.

Of course there are many more accounts of children being attacked, even killed, by pet dogs. But you have to realize that not only are there many more pet dogs in this country than hybrids, but there is, overall, a big difference in how they are kept. Most people do not expect their dog to ever cause any problems, especially around children. On the other hand, most of the people I know are, to some extent at least, cautious about allowing their hybrids access to children. Those with pure wolves are even more cautious. Many with pures do not allow any contact with children at all; those that do hold the wolf on a leash. Overall there are many more opportunities for dogs to attack children than there are for wolves or hybrids.

Of course, there are many hybrids that are good with children, even some pure wolves (as was Imbo). However, of the animals that I've seen or have heard of that are (or were) good with children, most are low in wolf content or are very young. The few exceptional animals are just that, exceptional. One of the problems I've seen in many people's perception about

wolves is generalization. Just because some hybrids are good with kids, that does not mean that all hybrids are good with them, or even that any particular animal will be safe and trustworthy around kids for all its life or under all circumstances. Any pure wolf has the potential of attacking, even killing a child. As for wolf hybrids, who would honestly be willing to take that chance with their children, not to mention the often fatal consequences if a hybrid should ever bite anyone? (Keep in mind the current rabies hysteria and how wolves and hybrids are often immediately killed for testing every time one bites a human.)

Everyone has probably seen newspaper ads describing hybrids for sale with one of the selling points being that they are "good with children". Some breeders will also claim this point in person. Keep in mind that there are a lot of breeders out there that are in it for the money. They look for means of selling animals and this is one. It's also important to realize that there are many hybrids being sold by inexperienced owners as well. Ignorant of their animals' potential, and having never been informed themselves that there could be a problem, they in turn will sell animals that are "safe with children."

If you question any of this, bring a small child over to visit someone's animals. Now through the fence (and make sure the animal cannot get over the fence), let them see the child. See how they react. Of course if the animals are shy your presence will affect their reaction and you will need the animal's owner be the one to show your child to the wolves and you can watch from a window. If the animals take keen interest in the child, orienting to it with an intense stare, or even if they just have their ears pricked, their tails up, their hackles up, or they run along the fence excitedly, those animals are potentially dangerous around small children. If on the other hand the animals make a slow submissive approach, ears laid back, tail partially tucked and show all the friendly behaviors that they show when they are shown pups, the animals are probably safe at least under supervision. However, I must emphasize, this does not mean that they will also be safe around children who run, fall, scream or in any way trigger that predatory response, or that they will even be safe around children all their lives. (Again, remember Imbo was six years old before he changed and he is but one of many "P.R." wolves that I know of that has "changed" and can no longer freely greet the public.)

Getting back to the child recently killed in Michigan: imagine a hybrid who is good with children, yet is kept chained up -- a very important part of what happened. Any animal on a chain is deprived of any normal social needs. Many of the chained animals that I have seen show marked signs of social deprivation. They are easily excitable, very rough and sometimes aggressive when approached. This is just speculation but when the child walked up, the hybrid probably became very excited. Someone was coming over to socialize with him! Now imagine what happens when a large animal, weighing many more times more than a small child, in his excitement accidentally knocks the child down. What do



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children do when toppled, and perhaps scratched? They scream and kick. This is just the thing that will trigger a predatory response. The animal does not mean to do it, it is programmed to do it.

The really tragic thing is that this was fully preventable! The mother should have known better than to leave a small child unsupervised in a back yard with any large dog. The owner should also have known better than to allow anyone to leave a child with the animal, and **MOST IMPORTANTLY THE HYBRID SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ON A CHAIN IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

An animal, any animal, that was always good with children suddenly finds itself with its chain wrapped around a panicked, screaming kid, the situation could either trigger a critical reaction in the animal (it bites in fear, snapping at anything nearby), or trigger predatory behavior. Either way, the child is severely injured. Worse yet, unsupervised children in the neighborhood may find that teasing the animal gets an interesting reaction, the animal in turn is conditioned to become aggressive with kids. In fact, chaining used to be part of "agitation training" of attack dogs. The animal would be put on a chain and someone would dart in and out of its range teasing it to bite. Before long the dog would become very aggressive.

All this does not mean that your animal will attack your child one of these days. It's more analogous to riding a motorcycle without a helmet. Of course you won't necessarily be killed if you ride without a helmet, but does that make it safe? No, it's a matter of chance, but with a much greater probability of being seriously injured, or even killed.

As tragic as this was for all the people involved, and for the animal as well, it is also tragic for all those who do keep their animals responsibly. Right now, Michigan is trying to pass a law prohibiting hybrids in that state. Following this tragedy, what do you think are the chances for the Michigan legislature to change its mind on the matter? Several other states in the area are either passing or enforcing laws prohibiting hybrids, how many others will follow?

The Anchorage Daily News recently reported that a 4-year-old child was also mauled by a hybrid that was kept on a chain. She was severely bitten on the face and scalp, but did survive. A couple months ago a free-running hybrid in Colorado bit a running child. Last year two chained hybrids attacked children in Minnesota, one little girl was killed. A chained hybrid in New York severely mauled the owner's son. Another hybrid in Florida was adopted from an animal shelter, was not placed in a secure yard or pen and got out. A good samaritan found the hybrid and in ignorance placed it in her yard with her own child. While she was calling the owners (the animal had tags) her child was killed. All these animals, and many more, were killed for their owner's mistakes. Like Michigan, many of these states have or are passing laws prohibiting hybrids. As for you, the

owners and breeders out there, how many other states will also ban hybrids? Only time will tell.

What can we do? We can police ourselves. We can do all we can to convince people to be responsible owners and to build pens for their animals and get them off chains. Hybrid organizations can put clauses in their registries requiring (as do lowolfers) that no animals are to be kept on a chain. Breeders should only sell to people that have already built a pen for their animals. If they can't afford a pen then they can't afford the animal and we can't afford any more tragedies like these.

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