

# Unleashed dogs a problem for fitness buffs

*Jogger wants to see leash bylaw enforced so he can run without fear of being attacked*

BY MICHELLE HALPERN  
Correspondent

Michael Siegel has been bitten by an unleashed dog too many times.

He has been trying to get dog owners to control their pets since he was attacked on the running track at Thornhill's Huntington Park last May.

The track is a popular place for owners to take their dogs for some exercise — unleashed.

But Siegel said that makes it dangerous for people to exercise.

In May, a large, angry dog tore his shorts. When the owner was asked to put the animal on a leash, he became angry and used foul language, Siegel said.

Last month, Siegel worked up the courage to exercise in the park again and found about 10 dogs running free by the track.

One of the dogs bit right through two layers of his clothing, including a thick coat, he said.

Trying to maintain his calm, Siegel asked the owners for some information on the dog, including whether it had rabies shots.

The owners ignored him and kept walking. When Siegel met up with the dog's owners again, they agreed to put the animal on a leash.

When Siegel got home that evening, he realized the bite was more serious than he originally thought.

He called animal control, yet "all they wanted to do was paperwork to report the

incident", Siegel said.

Markham Animal Control receives two to three calls per week reporting dog bites, but there is only one driver for the branch who can't attend all calls personally.

Supervisor Michael Nicholls said, "They are doing their best to be everywhere at the same time."

## AFTER HOURS ENFORCEMENT

But, he said, because Huntington Park is particularly bad, he received special permission from the town to go to there after work and help enforce the mandatory leash bylaw.

Siegel said he was happy to see animal control asking people to leash their dogs at the park.

Nevertheless, he reported seeing owners unleash their dogs as soon as the animal control officer left.

Nicholls agreed owners' attitudes can be a problem.

"Many people refuse to give their names and addresses," Nicholls said.

"Our driver recently had to follow one man for over an hour."

The fine for having an unleashed dog varies from town to town.

In Markham, it's \$50, but on the other side of Yonge Street in Vaughan it's \$125.

Nicholls has received requests to establish "leash-free" parks.

The creation of dog runs, or dog parks, has proven to be successful in many American cities.

These areas, usually fenced-off sections of city parks or beaches, allow dogs to run unrestrained.

In New York City and Los Angeles, dog runs have become a popular social scene. Owners sit on benches and socialize while their pets run free.

Some dog runs even have doggy watering



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Above, professional dogwalker Irina Tcharnaia always keeps her charges on a leash. Below, others aren't quite so careful, which sometimes presents problems for other users of Huntington park.

holes, a sort of water fountain for the dogs.

Although there are a few dog parks in Toronto, York Region has not yet tried the concept.

Another idea to control dog attacks at parks is to have designated hours when dogs can run unleashed.

But Siegel just wants to be left alone to exercise.

He doesn't care if there is dog feces on the ground or if he has to share his track with large dogs — as long as they're on a leash.

All he wants is the security of being able to run without fear of being attacked.



# Group helps parents cope with troubled teens

*New members are paired with parents who have had experience dealing with problems such as stealing or arrests*

BY DAWN LIERSCH  
Staff Writer

Years ago, Nancy Dixon's life was being ruined by her teens "acting out."

She'd come home to a house left in shambles from wild parties, would open her wallet and find her money stolen and spend countless hours learning the ropes of the court system.

It put a strain on her marriage, affected her job and left her tormented by guilt, feeling as though something she had done as a parent had caused the bad behaviour.

"I wasn't talking about it. I was ashamed and embarrassed and felt guilty. People think if kids are acting out, they have parents who are alcoholics or on social assistance.

"It's not true. It's a problem that crosses all social groups," Dixon said.

The family tried working with a psychologist, but to no avail because her teen didn't want to change.

Dixon felt alone.

Then she discovered the Aurora chapter of the Association of Parent Support Groups in Ontario, a non-profit group of parent volunteers that provides support, workshops and a forum for communication between parents, the government and professional organizations.

"After the first meeting, the difference was like night and day. I was empowered. I knew I did not live with this horror alone," she said.

"I had been a mess because the message I

had been receiving up until then was that my kid was the only one doing this."

By pairing new members with parents who have had experience dealing with problems such as verbal abuse, skipping school, stealing or arrests, the group tries to find ways to curb the bad behaviour and offers support while the problems are being worked out.

"Kids have peer pressure and this gives adults a peer group, too. When we realize our kids are doing things together, it's even more empowering because we can work together on a solution," she said.

*People think if kids are acting out, they have parents who are alcoholics or on social assistance.*

*It's not true. It's a problem that crosses all social groups.*

Dixon said she cried as she told the group about the turmoil she had been through with her teen, then was amazed when similar stories were shared.

She learned studies show about 40 per cent of parents report problems with their children.

She also learned it wasn't her fault. "Sure, there are some bad parents in the world, but the parents aren't always to blame. We believe in handing the kids the respon-

sibility, not the parents," she said.

Having recently been appointed president of the Association of Parent Support Groups in Ontario, overseeing 12 groups across Ontario, including chapters in Aurora and Richmond Hill, Dixon is now calling for community changes to force youth to be responsible for their actions.

Dixon says today's teens have grown up without fear of authority figures, leaving parents struggling to find ways to curb their kids' bad behaviour.

*Parents feel so isolated these days.*

*There's a saying that it takes a village to raise a child.*

*Communities have to stop turning a blind eye.*

"As parents, we haven't been taught to deal with it because our parents didn't deal with it," she said.

Dixon believes the police, courts, schools, parents and communities should work hand in hand to cut down on youth crime.

"Parents feel so isolated these days. There's a saying that it takes a village to raise a child. Communities have to stop turning a blind eye," she said.

Blaming lax enforcement of the Young Offenders Act for allowing too many teens to

slip through the cracks, Dixon is calling for a more punitive stance.

Dixon points out the existing Young Offenders Act gives courts the authority to bump certain cases into adult court, but it is rarely acted upon.

For instance, the courts ruled earlier this week that the three youths accused of beating Newmarket teen Jonathan Wamback into a coma last summer will not be tried in adult court.

Attempted murder charges have also been reduced to aggravated assault.

Dixon stressed "extreme" crimes such as the Wamback beating should be moved to adult court.

"It's a matter of the courts deciding to use the teeth provided to them within the Young Offenders Act. Where changes need to happen is in enforcing the act. Kids feel they can get away with anything until they're 18. They'll say, 'The day I turn 18, you'll bet I'll clean up my act,'" she said.

"Kids have the perception that the courts will not hold them accountable. We have to insist the courts be more heavy-handed."

"The extremes should be sent to adult court, but I'm concerned about the 14-year-old who gets mad and hurts somebody and ends up in jail for 10 years.

"We'll turn him into a criminal when maybe he could be rehabilitated," she said.

For more information on the group, call 1-800-488-5666.