

Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards¹

Steve A. Johnson and Martin B. Main²

Introduction

As Florida's human population continues to expand, natural areas are increasingly replaced and interspersed among residential areas and other urban land uses, including schools. As a result, encounters between people and snakes are likely to occur. Florida is home to 45 species of native snakes, 6 of which are venomous. Although the vast majority of human-snake encounters involve non-venomous species, occasionally a venomous snake may be encountered. Although interactions between people and venomous snakes rarely result in someone being bitten, the potential exists, especially if the snake is handled or harassed. Such instances are especially worrisome when a child comes into contact with a venomous snake.

Purpose

This document is part of an informational package designed to help teachers and parents protect children from potentially hazardous interactions with venomous snakes in Florida. Our target audience is the Florida Public School System, but private schools, child daycare centers, and homeowners will also find this information useful.

The *Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards* informational package contains:

1. information that can be provided by schools to concerned parents (included with this document)
2. steps schools can take to discourage snakes from entering school property, and a brief educational program teachers can present to students (a PowerPoint presentation with speaking notes is available free upon request)
3. an action plan regarding what to do in the event a child is bitten by a venomous snake, and
4. a printed document on recognizing venomous snakes in Florida.

Parent Information Letter

As part of our package *Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards* we suggest that school administrators consider informing parents about the actions they have taken to ensure the safety of children at schools. It is important that students receive consistent information about snakes at school

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2. Steve A. Johnson, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Mid-Florida Research and Education Center, University of Florida's Plant City Campus, 33563; Martin B. Main, Associate Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Southwest Florida Research and Education Center, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Immokalee, FL 34142.

and home. We emphasize that students be taught to respect snakes and adopt a “leave them alone” attitude.

Some important points to consider including in a letter to parents:

- The risk of a child getting bitten by a snake (venomous or non-venomous) at school is extremely low.
- In an article published recently in the scientific journal *The New England Journal of Medicine*, doctors specializing in the treatment of venomous snake bites said that only 2,000 cases of bites from venomous snakes are reported to poison control centers each year in the US, and only 5 or 6 of these bites (< 0.0025%) result in death.
- The vast majority of venomous snakebite victims are males between the ages of 17-27 years who are bitten during deliberate attempts to handle or kill snakes. Many of these young men are under the influence of alcohol.
- The school has taken a 3-part proactive approach to protect children from potential encounters with venomous snakes at school:
 1. Educating students – teachers have provided students a presentation and/or handout produced by the University of Florida-IFAS about Florida's venomous snakes and what to do in the event of a snake encounter.
 2. Maintenance actions – steps that have been taken to discourage snakes from entering school property.
 3. Emergency plan – an emergency action plan has been established in the unlikely event that a child is bitten by a snake at school.
- Encourage parents to speak to their children about snakes and emphasize respect for snakes and the “leave them alone” philosophy. Students should not attempt to handle or harm snakes at school or at home. Unfortunately, television shows such as the “Crocodile

Hunter” may do more harm than good when it comes to children and snakes. Children attempting to emulate what they see on television put themselves and others at serious risk of injury where venomous snakes or other wild animals are involved.

Suggested summary paragraph to parents:

Snakes are a part of Florida's environment. Like alligators and other wildlife, snakes should be treated with respect. Although no one can provide 100% assurance that a child will never encounter a venomous snake in Florida, (name of school) has taken steps to discourage snakes from entering our school grounds. We have educated our children to respect snakes and to inform a teacher or other adults if a snake is found at school. We also have an action plan in place to provide our children with prompt medical care to treat a bite from a snake should the need arise, which is extremely unlikely.

Summary

Preparation and education are key to avoiding snakebite at school and effectively dealing with the situation in the unlikely event a child is bitten.

Erecting barriers to keep snakes from getting on to school property and appropriate lawn and landscape maintenance will reduce the opportunity for snake/child interactions.

Educating children, parents, and school staff to respect snakes and adopt a “leave them alone” attitude will help prevent bites should snakes be encountered at school or elsewhere. Most victims are bitten because they were intentionally handling or trying to harm the snake. Fortunately, bites from venomous snakes are uncommon and are rarely lethal when prompt medical attention is provided. A separate document entitled “**Preventing Encounters between Children and Snakes**” is available as part of our package *Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards*. This document includes guidance on discouraging snakes from school grounds and a brief educational presentation that teachers can give to students to educate them about snakes. A free PowerPoint presentation with speaking notes is also available.

Having an action plan in place that involves access to immediate medical care and communication with a Poison Control Center will help ensure that snakebite victims get the best care possible. A separate document entitled “**Emergency Snakebite Action Plan**” is available as part of our package *Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards*. This document provides guidance on what to do in the event of a venomous snakebite.

<http://www.tomahawklivetrap.com> (we recommend their 60 Super Tube tongs with rubber cushions)

Additional Resources

Poison Control Hotline: 1-800-222-1222

Good books on Florida Snakes:

A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America by Roger Conant and Joseph Collins, Houghton Mifflin Company, 3rd edition, 1998 (one of the Peterson Field Guide Series)

Florida's Fabulous Reptiles and Amphibians by Pete Carmichael and Winston Williams, World Publications, 2004

Snakes of North America: Eastern and Central Regions by Alan Tennant, Lone Star Books, revised edition, 2003

Snake resources on the World Wide Web:

Florida Museum of Natural History—Online guide to Florida snakes:
<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/natsci/herpetology/FL-GUIDE/onlineguide.htm>

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission snake page:

<http://www.myfwc.com/critters/snakes.asp>

Partners in Amphibians and Reptile Conservation (PARC) site:

<http://www.parcplace.org/index.html>

Snake Handling Equipment

<http://www.tongs.com> (we recommend their Gentle Giant tongs)