

## Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards<sup>1</sup>

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### 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. Nevertheless, interactions between people and venomous snakes rarely result in someone being bitten. The potential for a bite exists, however, 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



**Figure 1.** Teaching children, parents, and school staff to respect snakes and adopt a "leave them alone" attitude will help to prevent snake bites. Credits: Monica E. McGarrity, University of Florida, 2007

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. This document is WEC 199, one portion of a 4-part package of the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation entitled "Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards." Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida. First published: September 2005, updated March 2009. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>. A CD/DVD set that includes PowerPoint presentations (with speaking notes) and other information on venomous snake safety is available from the IFAS Extension Bookstore (<http://www.ifasbooks.ufl.edu>). For additional information, visit Dr. Johnson's website at <http://ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. Steve A. Johnson, assistant professor and extension specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Gulf Coast Research and Education Center, University of Florida's Plant City Teaching Center, Plant City, FL, 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.

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

### Parent Information Letter

As part of our educational package titled "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 and home. We emphasize that students be taught to respect snakes and adopt a "leave them alone" attitude, as this will greatly reduce their chances of being bitten.

School administrators should consider including the following points in a letter to parents:

#### The risk of snakebite is very low

- The risk of a child getting bitten by a snake (venomous or non-venomous) at school is extremely low.
- According to a recent article published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, only 2,000 cases of bites from venomous snakes were reported to poison control centers each year in the US (from 1999-2002), and only 5 or 6 of these bites (less than 0.0025%) resulted 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.

#### Your school is acting to protect your children

- 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 with 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.

#### Parents can help!

- 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, educational television shows with snake-handling hosts 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. The document in this series entitled “Preventing Encounters between Children and Snakes” includes guidance on discouraging snakes from entering 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 by email request from Dr. Steve A. Johnson -- [tadpole@ufl.edu](mailto:tadpole@ufl.edu).

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. The document in this series entitled “Emergency Snakebite Action Plan” provides guidance on what to do in the event of a venomous snakebite.

## Additional Resources

This document is part of a four-document series produced by the University of Florida/IFAS Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation:

- Dealing with Venomous Snakes in Florida School Yards
- Preventing Encounters between Children and Snakes
- Emergency Snakebite Action Plan
- Recognizing Florida's Venomous Snakes

A CD/DVD set that includes PowerPoint presentations (with speaking notes) and other information on venomous snake safety is available from the IFAS Extension Bookstore (<http://www.ifasbooks.ufl.edu>).

**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, 3<sup>rd</sup> 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://myfwc.com/critters/snakes.htm>

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)

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