



GUIDANCE ON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN FROM THE RISK OF DOG BITES

INTRODUCTION

Dogs play an important part in family life. Dog bites and attacks occur rarely; however, there have been a number of high profile child deaths attributable to dogs with at least 21 fatalities, in the last 10 years, 13 of which, were babies or children. Official data from 2015 indicated that there were 7,227 hospital admissions from dog attacks in the previous year, with children under 10 the most likely to be admitted.

Dependant on the practitioner's role, a dog who is displaying aggressive behaviour or a child that has been bitten by a dog, may be encountered. The aim of this guidance is to provide information to those who are working with families and children with:

1. An overview of the legislative framework around dangerous dogs
2. Factors which increase the risk and vulnerability of children.
3. Advice that can be given to families with regard to preventing injuries from dog bites or attacks.
4. The basis for an effective risk assessment and the criteria that should prompt a safeguarding referral.
5. Medical considerations.

This document should be read in conjunction with Local Safeguarding Children's Board policies and procedures.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) provides detailed information on the legislation covering dogs, the responsibilities of owners and the actions that can be taken to remove and/or control dogs. Some of the key points are detailed below:

- The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act (2014), amended Section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) by extending the offence of being in charge of a dangerously out of control dog in a public place to 'any place in England or Wales', which includes private places.

- Any dog can be 'dangerous' (as defined by The Act) if it has already been known to inflict or threaten injury (this could be a bite and/or any other type of injury).
- Certain dogs are 'prohibited' and if any agency has any knowledge or report of a dog of this type, the matter should be reported to the police immediately;
- Injuries inflicted by certain types of dog are likely to be especially serious and damaging. Strong, powerful dogs such as Pit Bull Types will often use their back jaws (as opposed to 'nipping') and powerful neck muscle to shake their victims violently as they grasp which will cause more severe injuries.
- When reports of 'prohibited' dogs and known or potentially dangerous dogs are linked to the presence of children, all agencies should be alert to the possible risks and consequences.
- In the UK, it's against the law to own certain types of dog. These are the Pit Bull Terrier, the Japanese Tosa, the Dogo Argentino and the Fila Brasileiro: Identification of dog breeds is very difficult and can be problematic, even for experts. If you have any concerns the police should be contacted and an assessment made, and necessary action taken to protect children/the public. If someone has a banned dog, the police or local council dog warden (See Appendix 1) can take it away and keep it, even if:
 - it isn't acting dangerously or
 - there hasn't been a complaint. However, the police may need permission from a court to do this.

But, if the dog is in:

- a public place, the police don't need a warrant
- a private place, the police must get a warrant
- a private place and the police have a warrant for something else (like a drugs search), they can seize a dog

A police or council dog expert will judge what type of dog it is and whether it is (or could be) a danger to the public.

However, all dogs are capable of causing serious injuries

2. FACTORS WHICH INCREASE RISK AND VULNERABILITY

The following criteria enable effective assessment of risk to take place leading to a referral to safeguarding, the police or other agencies. Research (Public Health Wales 2014) has indicated that children are more vulnerable in certain circumstances of which practitioners should be aware:

- Children in the younger age range 0-4 years are more likely to receive injuries to the face or neck. The dog is often familiar to the child, but not necessarily living within the immediate family, although is in a familiar setting.

- Older children are more susceptible to being bitten on the hand or arm, more likely out in the open and by an unfamiliar dog.
- In some of the more serious cases, resulting in death, the child has been in the care of another (eg grandparent). The owner is often not present when a fatal attack occurs. In some cases the dog has been unsupervised when the attack has occurred.
- Dog bites of a severity to require hospitalisation are more frequent among children from deprived areas than children in less deprived areas.
- The breed of dog is not a good indicator of risk, it is the socialisation of the dog and the context in which the attack takes place that are more significant.
- The care, control and context of a dog's environment will undoubtedly impact on their behaviour and potential risks. Dogs that have been ill-treated/abused or kept in inappropriate conditions are more likely to be aggressive.
- Dogs that are kept and/or bred for the purpose of fighting, defending or threatening are likely to present more risks than genuine pets. Owners linked to criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, drugs or violence may have reason to encourage aggressive behaviour from dogs which puts children and young people at risk.
- Families, who experience high levels of aggression and domestic tensions including domestic violence, are more likely to trigger excitement and possible attacks by dogs; these families are less likely to appreciate and anticipate risks and may be less likely to take necessary precautions.
- Very young children living in chaotic or dysfunctional families are likely to be especially vulnerable to attack from animals through lack of supervision and care.

3. ADVICE THAT CAN BE GIVEN TO FAMILIES TO PREVENT INJURIES FROM DOG BITES AND ATTACKS

- The most important advice is never to leave a baby or young child unsupervised with a dog, no matter how well you know that dog.
- All professionals coming into contact with a family with dogs should emphasise the importance of ensuring babies and young children are never left alone with a dog, no matter how familiar the dog is to the family, and ensure the advice given is documented in the child's record.
- A range of resources about keeping children safe from dogs is available from the Blue Cross and Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Practitioners should give, or direct, any families with a dog to these resources (See Appendix 1).

4. RISK ASSESSMENT

In all cases of dog bites, an assessment must be carried out of the future risk to the child of further injury from dog bites to include consideration of a referral to children's social care. If attending / visiting an address where a dog is known

to have bitten a child and concerns remain about the dog's behaviour, consider one's own personal safety and that of any children present.

An Early Help Assessment or a referral to children's social care should be considered if practitioners encounter any of the following circumstances:

- Where there are concerns about the ill treatment of the dog or inappropriate conditions of care and there are children in the home. A referral should also be made to the RSCPA. There are clear links between animal cruelty and the capacity for child cruelty.
- The child/young person is under 18 years of age (24 if the young person is registered disabled) and the injuries sustained have been deemed serious enough to require assessment at an Accident and Emergency Department (A&E), Minor Injuries Unit (MIU) or GP surgery and initial information suggests the dog responsible could be prohibited and / or dangerous or the parents have acted irresponsibly.
- Where parents/carers are believed to be exposing a child to or failing to protect a child from a dog who is believed to be dangerous or prohibited.

Further Practitioner Guidance

- Practitioners have a duty to consider a referral to children's safeguarding if they treat a child who has been put in danger of sustaining a serious injury from an animal or have been left unsupervised with an unleashed dog.
- Practitioners who encounter a dangerous / prohibited dog in the community should apply a warning flag to their records / IT system to alert other practitioners in their organisation of the potential danger and share information on the risk when referring families to other agencies.
- Any safeguarding actions taken by A&E staff should be shared with the child's GP / Health Visitor or School Nurse via the discharge summary.
- The Police should be contacted on 101, if at any point a dog bites a child and you consider a dog is a serious risk to a child or a banned / prohibited dog.
- Any agency that becomes aware of a dog that could be prohibited or considered dangerous should collect as much information as possible to pass on to the Police:
 - The dog's name and breed
 - The owner
 - Any other family members particularly young children
 - The reason for keeping the dog.

5. MEDICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If a practitioner encounters a child who has received a dog bite, consider whether medical attention is required due to the risk of pasteurellosis or possible fracture, referring to GP, Minor Injuries Unit or A&E.

APPENDIX 1

USEFUL RESOURCES AND CONTACT NUMBERS

BLUE CROSS www.bluecross.org.uk

This website contains a range of information and resources about pets, pet care and safety including:

- Keeping your toddler safe around dogs leaflet
- Be safe with dogs: a guide for families leaflet
- Teaching down loads / resources for children of all ages

Blue Cross can also arrange for volunteers to undertake the following:

- Sessions on family dog safety for parents / parents to be
- Talks to schools and youth groups

RSPCA www.rspca.org.uk dogs and children designed to help parents understand and recognise dog behaviour making it easier for children to stay safe. The following resources are available:

Leaflet - Six golden rules for staying safe

Leaflet - Children and dogs – a guide to staying safe

Leaflet - Growing up with a dog – how children and dogs can enjoy living together leaflet

Poster – Keeping Kids safe, how kids SHOULD interact with dogs

Poster – Keeping Kids safe, how kids SHOULD NOT interact with dogs

RSPCA Education Team

<http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/training/safe-and-sound/>

Reporting cruelty

The RSPCA also runs a 24 hour help line, call 0300 1234 9999 to report cruelty or an animal in distress (sick, injured or trapped animal) or contact online as above.

Other useful contacts

Staffordshire Dog Wardens

Newcastle Under Lyme dog warden 01782 74 25 71

Stoke On Trent dog warden 01782 23 20 65

Staffordshire Moorlands dog warden 01538 48 35 30

Stafford dog warden 01785 61 94 02

East Staffordshire dog warden 01283 50 80 00

South Staffordshire dog warden 01902 69 62 19

Cannock Chase dog warden 01543 46 26 21

Lichfield dog warden 01543 30 80 00

Tamworth dog warden 01827 70 97 09

APPENDIX 2

Staffordshire County Council First Response Service:- 0800 1313 126

Open: Monday - Thursday 8:30am - 5:00pm

Friday 8:30am - 4:30pm

E-mail: FirstR@staffordshire.gov.uk

Emergency Duty Service:

(Out of Hours Service)

Telephone: 0345 604 2886

Mobile: 07815 492613

Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Referral Team:- 01782 235100

Open: Monday - Thursday 8:30am - 5:00pm

Friday 8:30am - 4:30pm

E-mail SRT.Referrals@stoke.gov.uk

Emergency Duty Team:

(Out of Hours Team)

Telephone: 01782 234234

The referral **must** be followed up in writing using a [Multi Agency Referral Form](#) (MARF) **within 48 hrs**

Staffordshire Police:

Telephone: 101 and ask for **M.A.S.H. (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub)**

Outside of MASH hours, report to the Area Communications Room

In an emergency always call 999

REFERENCES

Public Health Wales (2014) [Rapid review of deaths of children from dog bites or strikes](#)

www.gov.uk/control-dog-public

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Burton Hospital's NHS Foundation Trust
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