

Injuries Sustained by Dogs and Safeguarding Children

Introduction

The benefits of owning pets such as dogs are well established. Living in a pet owning household can have physical and emotional benefits for children as well as teaching them about responsibility and caring for living creatures. However, in recent years a number of children of different ages have been seriously injured or have died from attacks by dogs, and it is important therefore that professionals working with children and families are aware of the issues around dangerous dogs and the risks they can pose to children and young people.

The aim of this Policy is to help practitioners understand how to assess any risks which dogs in the household might pose to children and take action as necessary to protect children from serious injuries which can be inflicted by dogs that are prohibited, dangerous or badly looked after or mistreated by their owners.

This policy covers the following:

- How to routinely ask questions about dogs in the household or in regular contact with children and young people and how to assess any associated risks
- The action that should be taken if a child is living in a household with a prohibited or dangerous dog
- The information that should be gathered when any child is injured by a dog and the issues to be considered when making a referral in line with the referral to Worcestershire Children First.

The abuse of animals can be part of a constellation of intra-familial abuse, which can include maltreatment of children and domestic violence and abuse. However, this does not imply that children who are cruel to animals necessarily go on to be violent adults, or that adults who abuse animals are also violent to their partners and/or children. Effective investigation and assessment are crucial to determine whether there are any links between these factors and the possible risks to the safety and welfare of children and/or vulnerable adults.

Scope of this document

The purpose of this Policy explains the importance of professionals making routine enquiries regarding dogs that have injured a child/young person. It also looks at the action which is required when a child is injured by a dog and/or when there are concerns that a dog in the household may be dangerous or prohibited.

Legislation around Dangerous Dogs

The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) provides detailed information about the legislation covering certain types of dogs, sets out the responsibilities of the owners and described the actions that can be taken to remove and/or control dogs:

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

- Any dog can be 'dangerous' (as defined by the Act) if it has already been known to inflict or threaten injury

- 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
- 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 to children and potential consequences

Part 7 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 strengthens powers to tackle irresponsible dog ownership by extending the offence of owning or being in charge of a dog that is dangerously out of control in a public place to also cover private places. It also provides that a dog attack on an assistance dog constitutes an aggravated offence.

Part 7 also ensures that the courts can take account of the character of the owner of the dog, as well as of the dog itself, when assessing whether a dog should be destroyed on the grounds that it is a risk to the public.

Assessing the Risk to Children

When a practitioner from any agency either sees a child in hospital (ED) due to be being injured by a dog or undertakes a home visit and there are both children and dogs in the household, the practitioner should routinely consider whether the dog presents any kind of risk to the welfare of the child. This should involve a discussion with the parents or the pet owner about the dog's behaviour. This is particularly important when there is a new baby in the household. The pet owner should be asked whether the dog's behaviour has changed since the baby was brought home.

Particular attention must be paid while the baby is non mobile or similarly with a non-mobile disabled child and physical barriers may be required in some circumstances to help protect the child. This assessment of risk should be repeated when the baby begins to become mobile.

There will be times when even the most well cared for dog behaves in a way that had not been expected. The care, control and context of a dog's environment will impact on the dog's behaviour and the potential risks it may pose. Research indicates that neutered or spayed dogs are less likely to be territorial and aggressive towards other dogs and people. Dogs that are kept and/or bred for the purpose of fighting, defending or threatening others are likely to present more risks than genuine pets.

All children are potentially vulnerable from an attack by a dog, but very young children are likely to be at greatest risk. A young child will be unaware of the potential dangers they could face and will be less able to protect themselves. Small children are of a size that leaves especially vulnerable parts of their body exposed. The question should be asked: 'is the dog left alone with the child?' This applies even if the child is in a cot, bed or seat of some kind.

If it is the professional judgement of the practitioner that a dog presents a risk to a child, the police and Children's Services should be contacted immediately.

Protection and action to be taken

WAHT staff that have been made aware of a dog that has injured a child, should collect the following information:

- The dog's name and breed
- Information about the owner

- The reason for keeping the dog and information about other family members, particularly young children

Where there is a report of a child having been injured by a dog (or exposed to the risk of injury) a referral to Children's Social Care should be considered. In deciding whether or not to make a referral, consideration should be given to:

- The nature of the injuries
- The circumstances of the attack / incident
- Whether the parents or dog owner sought medical advice
- Whether the dog has previously shown any aggression
- What action the pet owner has taken to prevent a recurrence of any attack

Remember, if a practitioner has reason to believe that a dog in the household is prohibited or presents a risk to a child, the Police or Children's Services should be contacted immediately.

A referral should also be made where a prohibited and/or dangerous dog is reported and/or treated, and is believed to be living with and/or frequently associated with children.

Some referrals might be logged 'for information only' by the agencies, for example if it is clearly established that no significant or continued risk is likely to the child, or other children (for example, if the dog – which was the only dog in the household - has already been 'put down' or removed to another house where no children are present).

Some referrals might prompt 'information leaflets' on Dogs and Safe Care of Children to be issued for example, if the incident or injury was clearly minor, if the child was older or if the family have clearly shown themselves to be responsible dog owners. See [Parent Tips - Keeping Babies and Children Safe Around Dogs in the Home \(Institute of Health Visiting\)](#) and [The Blue Cross Be Safe with Dogs Leaflet - Guidance for Families](#).

In more serious cases a Strategy Discussion and joint Section 47 investigation should lead to further discussions with other agencies and home visits to complete assessments and to inform judgements on parenting and the care and control of the dog(s).

Advice might be sought from a veterinary professional to help determine the likely nature or level of risk presented by the dog(s). As with all other assessments 'the welfare of the child is paramount.'

Significant Issues

The RSPCA offer the following advice to all professionals who are in contact with a household where there is a dog/s present:

"When looking at, or asking about a dog, think about the following points, which should not be considered an exhaustive list but are intended to prompt a professional's curiosity as to the state of the dog's welfare along with suggested courses of action."

"The points relate to Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act, 2006 which imposes a duty of care on a person who is permanently or temporarily responsible for an animal. This duty of care requires that reasonable steps in all the circumstance are taken to ensure that the welfare needs of an animal are met to the extent required by good practice.

The welfare needs are:

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

When asking if there is a dog in the property always consider if the dog lives in the back garden. If there is, and the dog isn't in the same room as you, ask to see the dog."

Illegal Dog Breeds

The breeds of dog currently illegal in the UK are:

- Pit Bull Terrier
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentino
- Fila Brasileiro
- Crossbreeds including any of those types of dog may also be subject to the law, depending on their size and characteristics