



# Multi-agency Guideline for Safeguarding Children and Adults around Dogs

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## 1. Purpose of Practice Guidance

This multi-agency guideline aims to provide a regional and consistent approach to safeguarding children and adults around dogs.

Dogs can be valued companions and play an important part in society and family life. However, there have been incidents in England and Wales where children and adults have been killed or seriously injured by dogs both within and outside the household. 2022 saw a sudden jump in the number of people in England and Wales dying because of dog bite injuries. While a typical year records three fatal attacks, the death toll in 2022 totalled 10. Four of the victims were children. (BMJ 2023).

This guidance is intended to provide a useful reference tool for any Practitioners working closely with children, families or adults at risk. The guideline sets out to explain and describe:

- The children and adults most likely to be vulnerable and the dogs most likely to be dangerous.
- Advice that can be given to families regarding preventing injuries from dog bites or attacks.
- The information that should be gathered when any child or adult is injured by a dog
- Effective risk assessment and the criteria that should prompt actions, including a safeguarding report.

## 2. Dangerous Dogs

The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) provides very detailed information on the legislation covering certain types of dogs, the responsibilities of owners and the actions that can be taken to remove and/or control dogs.

From the 13 May 2014 the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, section 3 was extended to include the offence of being in charge of a dog dangerously out of control in a public place to 'any place in England or Wales', which includes private places.

In the UK it is against the law to own certain types of dog unless the owner has a certificate of exemption. These dogs are: Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino, Fila Brasileiro, and XL Bully. If any agency has any knowledge or report of a dog of this type, the matter should be reported to the police immediately via 101. The Police can then carry out relevant checks as to the circumstance of such ownership and verify any exemption.

However, **any dog**, irrespective of breed, 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 and adults, all agencies should be alert to the possible risks and consequences.

### 3. Risk Assessment

The benefits of owning pets are well established. Having a pet can have physical and emotional benefits for a child and adults as well as teaching them about responsibility and caring for living creatures. However, there are also risks and when you visit a family that has a dog or observe a dog in the community you need to consider whether or not the dog poses any threat to the child's or adult's health, development or safety and / or a risk to the visiting professional.

All professionals coming into contact with a family with dogs must emphasise the importance of ensuring babies, young children and vulnerable adults 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 / adult's relevant records.

A range of resources about keeping children safe from dogs is available for professionals to signpost people to (Appendix 1). It must be noted that there are no discoverable resources for adults with care and support needs.

All children and adults are potentially vulnerable from attack(s) from dog(s).

- Young and very small children are likely to be at greatest risk.
- Adults with care and support needs are more likely to be vulnerable.
- A young child and some adults may be unaware and unprepared for the potential dangers they could face.
- A young child may be less able to protect themselves and more likely to be of a size that leaves especially vulnerable parts of their body exposed to any 'assault'.
- A large dog in a small home.
- A dog left alone with the child or adults with care and support needs or adult at risk.

If you consider a dog is a serious risk to a child or adult, you must contact the police immediately.

In addition to the above, practitioners should be mindful of individuals and families who may own or breed more than one dog. Additional scrutiny should take place in respect of households who are involved in regular breeding and the keeping of packs of dogs, as additional risk may be present.

#### 3.1 Owners and Families (including extended family and temporary carers)

Some people may insist that 'the owner, not the dog' is the problem. There will be occasions when even the 'best' of owners fails to anticipate or prevent their dog's behaviour. The care, control and context of a dog's environment will undoubtedly impact on their behaviour and potential risks.

Research indicates that neutered or spayed dogs are less likely to be territorial and aggressive towards other dogs and people.

##### Owners:

- Owners linked to criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, drugs or violence may have reason to encourage aggressive behaviour from dogs.

- In some cases, such incidents have occurred where owners have encouraged aggressive behaviours from the dog, some of these owners have had links with criminal activities and some not.

Families, who experience high levels of aggression and domestic tensions:

- Are more likely to trigger excitement and possible attacks by dogs.
- Are less likely to appreciate and anticipate risks.
- May be less likely to take necessary precautions.
- May be less likely to guarantee the safety of the most vulnerable youngsters.
- Very young, small children living in chaotic or dysfunctional families are likely to be especially vulnerable.
- Prohibited, dangerous, powerful dogs are likely to inflict the most serious injuries.

(Public Health Wales, 2014)

### **3.2 Practitioner Guidance**

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.

During the visit ask if there is a dog in the property including the back garden. If there is, and the dog isn't in the same room as you, ask to see the dog. Any agency aware of a dog that could be prohibited or considered dangerous should collect as much information as possible:

- The dog's name and breed.
- The owner.

- The reason for keeping the dog (Dogs that are kept and/or bred for the purpose of fighting, defending, or threatening are likely to present more risks than genuine pets).
- Any children or adult in the home (particularly young children and adults with care and support needs).

This information should be logged with Police via 101 and shared with the RSPCA.

Information should also be shared appropriately with Childrens and Adult Services if a professional has concerns about a child or adult at risk, making referrals as required (as detailed below).

#### **4. When to make a report/ referral**

All agencies should consider making a report/ referral to Children's services where there is a report of a child being injured by a dog (or exposed to risk of injury). A report/ referral should similarly be considered to Adult Services in the event that an adult at risk is reported to have been injured by a dog or is exposed to risk of injury. In deciding whether to make a report/ referral, consideration should be given to:

- The nature of the injuries
- The circumstances of the attack/incident
- The age of the child (chronological and developmental)

The vulnerability of the adult

- Whether the parents/ carer /dog owner sought medical advice/treatment
- Whether the dog has previously shown any aggression
- What action the parents/ carers /dog owner has taken to prevent any recurrence

Some reports/ referrals might be logged 'for information' only by the agencies, if it is clearly established that no significant or continued risk is likely to the child, or other children/ adults (for example, if the dog has already been 'put down' or removed).

Some reports/ referrals might prompt information leaflets (Appendix 1).

In more serious cases, initial enquiries, assessments or joint section 47 investigations would lead to further discussions with other agencies:

- Home visits to complete fuller assessments and to inform judgements on parenting / caring capacity and the care and control of dog(s).
- Advice might be sought from a vet to help determine the likely nature or level of risk presented by the dog(s).

## 5. References

Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014: Part 7: Dangerous Dogs UK Government, 2014 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/7/enacted>

BMJ (2023) Rising fatalities, injuries, and NHS costs: dog bites as a public health problem [Rising fatalities, injuries, and NHS costs: dog bites as a public health problem | The BMJ](#)

[CoramBAAF Dog Assessment Form](#)

Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 UK Government, 1991 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/65/contents>

Public Health Wales (2014) Rapid review of deaths of children from dog bites or strikes [www.gov.uk/control-dog-public](http://www.gov.uk/control-dog-public)

RSPCA, [Understanding a Dog's Body Language](#)

### Additional Resources

This is a list of resources that provide advice for both professionals and families for keeping children safe around pets. Consider which is most useful for your work and, if relevant, which is appropriate to be delivered to the families you work with.

[Keeping babies and children safe around dogs in the home](#) (Institute of Health Visiting)

[The six golden rules to keeping children safe and dogs happy](#) (RSPCA)

[Dogs and children: living happily together](#). (Dogs Trust)

[Dogs and Children: Top tips to keep them safe and happy together](#) (Child and Accident Prevention Trust)

[Your dog and your baby fact sheet](#) (Child and Accident Prevention Trust)

[Child safety around dogs fact sheet](#) (Child and Accident Prevention Trust)