



Dangerous Dogs and Safeguarding Children

Scope of this chapter

This guidance explains the importance of professionals making routine enquiries regarding dogs in the household whenever they are working with children and families. It then 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.

1. Introduction and Definition

The benefits of owning pets 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 and adults 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 chapter is to help practitioners understand how to assess any risks which dogs in the household might pose to children and act 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.

The guidance 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; and
- 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 Report a concern about a child process.

Report a concern about a child process [Concern about a child | NELC](#)

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.

2. Legislation Relating to Dangerous Dogs

The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) was amended in 1997 and was introduced after a spate of dog attacks. It provides detailed information about the legislation covering certain breeds and types of dogs, sets out the responsibilities of the owners and describes the actions that can be taken to remove and/or control dogs. The Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/65/contents>)

The Act states that five breed types (Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino, the Fila Brasileiro and XL Bully) are illegal to own, breed, sell, gift, or allow to stray in the UK. It is important to note the word 'type' as this means that any dog that fits most of the characteristics associated with one of the banned breeds can fall within this classification.

- 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 muscles 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. of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/7/enacted>)

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 because it is a risk to the public.

The Home Office Crime Classification 8/21 is amended to: "Owner or person in charge allowing a dog to be dangerously out of control in any place in England or Wales (whether or not in a public place) injuring any person or assistance dog." Section 3 (1) Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 as amended by Section 106 Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014.

3. Assessing Risks to Children and Young People

When a practitioner from any agency undertakes a home visit and there are both children and dogs in the household, the practitioner should routinely consider whether the presence of the dog/s presents any kind of risk to the welfare of the child/ren. 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. 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 to 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 bodies exposed. The advice from the RSPCA is that dogs should not be left alone with young children. (See Keeping children safe around dogs.)

Keeping children safe around dogs

(<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/company/children/safe>)

See also Section 5, Significant Issues for guidance from the RSPCA on assessing whether a dog's welfare needs are being met.

If it is the professional judgement of the practitioner that a dog is prohibited or presents a risk to a child, the Police or Children's Social Care should be contacted immediately.

4. Protection and Action to be Taken

Any agency that becomes aware of a dog that could be prohibited or considered dangerous 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; and
- 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 is believed to be living with or frequently associated with children.

Some referrals might be logged 'for information only' by the agencies, for example if it is 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 minor, if the child was older or if the family have clearly shown themselves to be responsible dog owners.

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.'

5. 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 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 him."

6. Further Information

Controlling your dog in public (GOV.UK) Controlling your dog in public (GOV.UK)
(<https://www.gov.uk/control-dog-public>)

The Simplest Way to Understand the Dangerous Dogs Act & Breed Specific Legislation in the UK (<https://www.k9magazine.com/the-simplest-way-to-understand-the-dangerous-dogs-act-breed-specific-legislation-in-the-uk/>)

The Dogs Trust: Staying Safe with Dogs (<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/factsheets-downloads/stay%20safe%20around%20dogs.pdf>)

Battersea Dogs and Cats Home (<https://www.battersea.org.uk/pet-advice>)

Kennel Club's Safe & Sound Programme with Resources for Schools [Safe and Sound Award Scheme | The Kennel Club](#)

National Animal Welfare Trust (<https://www.nawt.org.uk/news/changes-to-the-dangerous-dog-act-advice-for-owners/>)

Advice on keeping babies safe around dogs in the home
(<https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/public-health/advice-on-keeping-babies-safe-around-dogs-in-the-home-13-04-2017/>)