Dangerous Dogs and Safeguarding Children

1. Introduction and Definition

The benefits of owning pets are well established. Having a pet can have physical and emotional benefits for a child as well as teaching them about responsibility and caring for living creatures. However, a number of children of different ages have been seriously injured or have died from attacks by dogs in recent years.

Therefore the aim of this chapter is to assist practitioners to assess risk and take action to protect children from serious injuries which can be inflicted by dogs that are prohibited, dangerous or badly looked after by their owners.

The practice guidance addresses the following:

- The information that should be gathered when any child is injured by a dog and the criteria that should prompt a referral in line with the Contact and Referral procedure:
- The basis for an effective assessment of risk and the options for action that should be considered in strategy discussions or at Child Protection Conferences.

Research suggests that abuse of animals can be part of a constellation of intra-familial violence, which can include maltreatment of children and domestic 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)** provides detailed information about the legislation covering certain types of dogs, the responsibilities of the owners and the actions that can be taken to remove and/or control dogs:

- Certain dogs are 'prohibited' (gov.uk/control-dog-public/banned-dogs) 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 and consequences.

Part 7 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 strengthens powers to tackle irresponsible dog ownership by extending to private places the offence of owning or being in charge of a dog that is dangerously out of control in a public place. 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, when assessing whether a dog should be destroyed on the grounds that 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 children and dogs in the household, the practitioner should consider whether the presence of the dog/s may present any kind of risk to the welfare of the child/ren.

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 in particular those who are very young **and/or** who have additional needs and therefore reduced understanding. Approximately 50 per cent of dog bites or attacks in the UK affect the 0 – 9 years age group. (see Annual number of deaths from dog attacks or bites - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) for more information). 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.

4. Protection and Action to be Taken

Any agency that becomes aware of a dog that could be prohibited or considered dangerous, should collect as much information as possible:

- 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.

All dog bites should be reported to the police, either by parent/carer or professional, as a form of notification and get a CAD reference number as part of the referral pathway.

Referrals to Police can be made by 999 (if an emergency), 101 or online at the Surrey Police website - Home | Surrey Police

Upon referral the following process will take place:

Some 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 (for example, if the dog has already been euthanised or removed).

A referral to Children's Services may also be required - Report a concern about a child or young person - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk)

In more serious cases a strategy discussion will be held as per section 47 procedures (Strategy Discussions and Section 47 Enquiries | Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership Procedures Manual))

If necessary, advice will be sought from the police or 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.'

6. Further Information

- **The Blue Cross Be Safe with Dogs Leaflet - Guidance for Families**;
- **The Dogs Trust: Staying Safe With Dogs**;
- **Battersea Dogs and Cats Home** has made this 7 minute animated film to keep children safe around animals: **"Take the Lead: Respecting dogs by Bat and Zee"**;
- **Kennel Club's Safe & Sound Programme with Resources for Schools**;
- **National Animal Welfare Trust Advice**.
- **RSPCA Dogs and Canines behaviour**
- **Surrey Police**
- **Report a concern about a child or young person (C-SPA)**
- **Controlling your dog in public: Banned dogs - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)**

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