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Resources

UK dog law

www.doglaw.co.uk Video talks and seminars for owners

DDA WATCH Summary of dog legislation (England/Wales):
http://www.ddawatch.co.uk/uk_legislation_dogs_and_theLaw

Regional government websites

Dogs and children

THE BLUE DOG Interactive educational tool for 3- to 6-year-olds from www.apbc.org.uk

CHILD ACCIDENT PREVENTION JERSEY (CAPJ) (2013). 'Speak Dog and Stay Safe.' <http://cap.je/projects/speak-dog-and-stay-safe/>

HARTMANN-KENT, S. (1999). *Your Dog And Your Baby: A Practical Guide*. Wenatchee, USA. Dogwise Publications.

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Dogs and children: match made in heaven or hell?

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ABSTRACT: Research shows that interacting with animals can support a child's development of empathy, pro-social behaviour and responsible attitudes. Dog owners and non-owners both have responsibilities to ensure interactions are successful. When interactions fail, injury can ensue which may be extremely severe in the case of children. For the dog, destruction is a frequent outcome. This paper provides suggestions for the provision of prophylactic advice to owners and non-owners to help prevent such tragedies occurring.

The dog and the family

Until the late 1980s, most people thought that dogs and children went together like peaches and cream. The traditional British storybook family frequently included a dog who was the children's playmate, comforter and guardian. Think Peter Pan and Nana or The Famous Five and Timmy. This image is based on a belief that dogs bring children benefits. Research indicates that pet ownership can support the development of empathy, pro-social behaviour and responsible attitudes (McArdle *et al.* 2011), if children have suitable adult role models to show them how to look after and behave around animals. It is not something that magically happens between animal and child.

This may be obvious, but society's perception of dogs is coloured by myth and preconceptions. Sadly, this seems to be a general reflection of our view of society. Over the last 40 years the world for children, and dogs, has changed dramatically. There is a fear of risk-taking, we take less personal responsibility for our actions and increasingly distrust and blame others.

Children are more restricted in their opportunities to explore their physical environment, thereby having less chance to learn about risk assessment and how to interact with both the animate and inanimate world. There are fewer parks and places where they can play, whether

for fear of them injuring themselves, for example by climbing trees, or because of our increasing distrust of other people.

Changes in society

Unfamiliar people are often considered as threats rather than simply as other people. Increasing numbers of us, especially in cities, avoid normal human communication with strangers – making eye contact, nodding, smiling or just passing the time of day. Personally, I refuse to play along with this view and my logic is simple. Humans have not changed. There has always been a spectrum of individuals who demonstrate varying degrees of antisocial behaviour, including those who suffer from a range of mental health problems. Yet, as social animals, we respond to positive interactions from others (Etzel & Gerwitz 1967) and, far more often than not, my smile to the stranger is reciprocated, giving positive reinforcement to us both.

Dogs in today's society

Likewise, we categorise dogs as 'good, safe', 'rogue, mad' or 'dangerous, evil' often simply on how they, or their owner, looks! Some breeds are labelled as 'being good with children' while others are depicted as inherently evil and, like the (mythical) wolf in the story of Red Riding Hood, only intent on harming children.

Categorising the world enables us to make quick decisions, leaving our brain free for more complex tasks (Forgas, Cooper & Crano 2010). However, many divisions of good and evil are illogical. They are thrust into our brain via words and pictures, from the media or other people we know (Sternthal, Dholakia & Leavitt 1978). Consciously and unconsciously we absorb these messages, and they influence our thoughts and behaviours (Chaiken, Liberman & Eagly 1989). This is the process of creating stereotypes and discriminative behaviour (Wildschut, Insko & Gaertner 2002). We behave differently towards those we consider to be in our 'in-group' compared to those labelled as 'other', the 'out-group'. This can lead to aggression towards the latter – children's gangs, adult riots or wars.

Are dogs really more dangerous today?

So what are the effects of discrimination when we apply it to dogs? What can happen if we do not understand that a dog is a dog, not a human in disguise, regardless of what it looks like or who it is with?

Annually, millions of people are injured – by falling, traffic accidents, a person or a non-human animal (e.g. cats, rats, cattle, parrots, reptiles and horses). But it is the dog-related injuries that make the headlines, probably because of the horror of being hurt by 'man's best friend'. Indeed, at first glance the statistics paint a scary picture. In England, during the 12 months between February 2013 and January 2014 there were 9,713 hospital admissions for non-human mammal-related injuries, of which 6,743 (69%) were dog-related and 2,970 caused by other species (HSCIC 2014a).

But are dogs really twice as dangerous as other mammals? No! Most human-animal interactions involve dogs. A UK population of 9 million dogs (PFMA 2014) means a vast number of non-injurious daily interactions. Further, in the 11 months between April 2013 and February 2014, there were 18.3 million attendances at UK hospital A&E departments (HSCIC 2014b) of which 3.8 million (20.9%) resulted in hospital admission (HSCIC 2014b). Most people injured by dogs, and needing hospitalisation, attend A&E initially. Thus, dog-related injuries comprised only 0.17% of hospital admissions via A&E.

Behavioural triggers

This is not to belittle the devastating effects that such injuries can have on the individual, their family, the dog and the owner, especially as most dog bites are preventable. The veterinary nursing profession has an important role to play in providing good prophylactic advice. But to do so, we need to understand why people, and in particular children, get injured. This brings us back to the 'good dog–evil dog' syndrome.

Dogs are labelled as 'friendly', 'good with children' or simply deemed as such by *not* being labelled as 'bad' or 'not friendly'. This labelling is central to understanding why most people are bitten by dogs they own or know, or by breeds of dog that they had perceived as friendly. Such perceptions mean they often take liberties that they would not take otherwise, such as rapidly approaching, bending over, picking up, hugging or kissing the dog – all things a young child might do and, indeed, often the victim *is* a young child. Such behaviours can cause the dog to snap, perhaps because it is startled or frightened or because the person, adult or child, has accidentally caused it pain. Those who are dog-aware may not be surprised by the dog's behaviour but wonder at the humans, and why parents did not stop the child. Yet, one must understand the power of our ill-conceived beliefs and it is not just the non-owners. Many owners are devastated that their dog, their 'family member', could behave in such a way and have the dog destroyed, easing their horror and grief by labelling it as having 'gone mad' or 'rogue'.

The effect of human behaviour on dogs

Dogs labelled as 'bad, vicious' can cause equally over-compensating behaviours in people. A recent anecdote told to me was of an adult man who risked his life dodging traffic in order to cross the road so that he did not have to pass a Staffordshire Bull Terrier and its owner walking towards him. Others who are fearful of an approaching dog may simply stiffen, stare at the dog or shrink away from it, parents may pull their child away, and some children will scream at the sight of a dog. In all cases, these people will be emitting fear pheromones, which can cause anxiety in the dog (Horowitz 2010; Gadbois & Reeve 2014).

In addition, the dog may find the people's behaviour threatening or frightening. If it is sufficiently frightening, a single such incident can cause the dog to learn, and classically associate, its feelings of fear with these people and generalise this to other people who look similar (Pearce 2008), with potentially devastating consequences.

People may react in this way to any type of dog, and for a variety of reasons. The person may have been previously traumatised by a dog, may not have been brought up with (socialised to) dogs, hold certain religious beliefs or come from a country with endemic rabies. Frequently, it is simply that the dog is perceived as a 'dangerous breed' – often anything that looks like a Rottweiler or Staffordshire Bull Terrier – and this perception is magnified should the owner be identified as being of a certain 'type'.

False assumptions

An example of the unfortunate consequences of these sorts of attitude is the case of Logan Trim who was injured by an unfamiliar Labrador when he was three years old (*Daily Mail* 2011). Logan's mother is reported to have said that she 'saw [the] lady sat down... she had a dog, which looked like a Labrador, and a puppy with her. It wasn't a Pit Bull or a Staffordshire Bull Terrier that you would think was dangerous.' In other words, she assumed it would be safe. Indeed, the reporter too makes the same assumption, stating that 'the attack was especially shocking as Labradors are known for having an excellent temperament and are friendly around children and other dogs, according to experts.' Apparently such an attitude is justified since 'experts' imply this would not have been the behaviour of a normal Labrador. I hasten to say that I was not the expert: biting is normal behaviour for any dog, and no breed is inherently friendly around children.

This brings to the fore another point highlighted in this one article: what is considered aggravating behaviour? Although Logan's mother did not see what happened, she said that he was not 'running or shouting and didn't do anything to provoke it'. Of course, we do not know if he hugged the dog, fell on to it or hurt it, as no one saw the incident, but the perception is that provocation would be the child 'running and shouting'.

The VN's role in education

How can we help prevent such incidents? There are four groups to consider. First, children, parents and owners need to be informed about dog behaviour and communication and how to respond.


Then dogs need to be taught that humans look and behave in a variety of ways, and that they do not need to be frightened. There is a long-term need for veterinary training and behaviour professionals to work closely with educators, health professionals and parent groups, as well as with dogs and their owners, to improve safety training. Meanwhile, we should all address issues where we can.

Veterinary nurses are ideally placed to help advise dog and puppy owners of their responsibilities and how to meet them and thereby ensure the safety of others, and the life of their dog. Here is a brief list of steps that can be taken by you at your practice. A list of helpful resources is included in the box at the beginning of this article.

- Ensure that owners are aware that *they are responsible* for their dog's actions, both in civil and criminal law, and this refers to public places *and* within their own homes (UK Dangerous Dogs Act extended in May 2014).
- Provide resources to enable owners to understand their legal obligations (see Resources box).
- Advise owners of nervous dogs to take precautions when their dog is around people. Incidents occur in a split second! A muzzle or indoor kennel can save a dog's life, assuming people are also taught not to stick their fingers in the kennel! Relevant training leaflets are available from the APBC (www.apbc.org.uk).
- For dogs that are nervous of people, muzzles also act as a visual alert and have the advantage of keeping people away, so the dog is less stressed.
- Promote the 'YELLOW = this dog needs space' campaign (Yellow Dog Project). Though originally conceived only with regard to dogs wary of other dogs, this can be extended to dogs that are nervous of people. Yellow is commonly associated with nervousness, which is a more accurate message about the dog's feelings than red, which usually denotes 'danger'. The yellow lead ribbon or bandana must be clearly visible to approaching people. A collar may not be enough if it is hidden by the dog's fur.

- Ensure that your local puppy and dog training classes incorporate exercises to socialise all dogs to children and 'child-like' behaviours. These should include training dogs, using positive reinforcement (Pearce 2008), to react calmly to and be able to be called away from *adults and children* who approach rapidly, touch them suddenly, scream, hug or run towards them. Dogs need to learn about *a range of* human behaviours, not just those of dog-aware adults and well-trained children. This is a critical part of giving the dog life skills, 'bomb-proofing' them to the vagaries of us humans. If the puppy/dog class does not or will not do this, make it clear that you will remove it from the list of classes that you provide to clients.
- Ensure that owners understand that no matter how 'good' the dog, how 'sensible' the child, dogs and children *must be supervised*, and that means being watched...remember Logan.
- Talk to local schools and other groups about the importance of educating children (and parents) about how to behave around dogs. We are currently writing up research carried out at Southampton University with Child Accident Prevention Jersey on their 'Speak Dog and Stay Safe' programme. The findings suggest that this programme helps 5- to 6-year-olds to be more cautious around dogs.
- Have resources available for owners and inform local health and education services of those available, such as Hartmann-Kent (1999), Shepherd (2007), 'The Blue Dog' and 'Speak Dog and Stay Safe'. Some ideas are given in the Resources box.

Conclusion

The world is full of pleasure, but there are risks, and sensible precautions should be taken. You do not watch a storm standing under a tree – unless you want to be struck by lightning. Can children and dogs be a match made in heaven? My answer is a resounding 'Yes!', but children (and adults) will continue to be injured when human behaviour does not account for the nature of dogs. We need to teach all our dogs about people and people about all dogs so that we can reduce the chances of misunderstandings and injuries. 

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