

Dogs and children: a family approach

Following the UK's first National Dog Bite Prevention and Behaviour Conference, SCAS Head of Operations and Development Julia Dando discusses dog safety, bite prevention and effective education programmes.

Sadly it's not often a week goes by when we don't see somewhere in the news a fresh story of a child being mauled or bitten by a dog. In the most horrifying of cases children lose their lives and in most cases the dogs always lose their lives as a consequence of a bite-related incident. I can only imagine the heartache and anguish that anyone involved in this sort of incident will experience. Permanent scars both physical and mental are the sad reminders for the "lucky ones" that survive, and their families.

It is something that, as a dog owner myself, I am very sensitive about, not just for the safety of the children around me but for the safety of my dog – who is also a much-loved family member in this household.

I was recently attending an open-air event with my rescue greyhound and while I was talking to a friend I turned to see a small child (perhaps two or three years old) approaching my dog's face, arms outstretched to give it a full-on face hug. I immediately intervened, putting my arm between the child and the dog saying *"Don't walk up to the doggy please"*. The parent of the child, who had been nonchalantly watching from afar in the ice cream queue, returned loudly *"If your dog isn't safe it shouldn't be allowed out in public.... you should have a muzzle on that dog!"*

At the time I politely but firmly pointed out that *"No dog is safe for an unfamiliar child to approach in that way, particularly on a hot day like today"* but as is often the case when I was later replaying the event in my mind I became incensed with the attitude of this parent, which it appears is not by any means an isolated view. I'm sure that in the awful and unfortunate event that a similar incident does lead to a nasty bite to the face, the parent will find little comfort in the fact that it *"wasn't their fault"* – I certainly doubt the child ever will. Negating responsibility for the safety of your child (or your pet) is never acceptable in my humble and personal opinion.

Statistical insights

Worldwide research points to children being the most likely age group to receive a dog bite and that those below the age of 14 were most likely to be bitten on the face and head.²

According to the UK's Health and Social Care Information Centre, in the 12 months to January 2014, the age group

with the highest number of hospital admissions for dog bites was children aged between 0–9 years old. Hospital injury data also show that young children are more likely to be bitten by a family dog than one they don't know, and that children suffered more injuries to their head than any other age group.⁴

A recently published study in *Anthrozoos*³ might help us to understand why this is the case. The study looked at how children interpret dog behaviour and showed that children up to the age of six years were particularly poor at recognising when a dog was fearful and concluded that their ability to correctly interpret dog behaviour increased with age.

It also suggested that most young children tended to look to a dog's face only for an indication of its behaviour. They rarely considered other behaviour indicators such as the body position or tail.

The researchers proposed that an effective dog-bite prevention programme should include a component teaching children how to interpret dog behaviour and also a component teaching them how to avoid dangerous situations. It was also suggested that the programme should be composed of videos of real dogs, because video has shown to be a more effective medium than static pictures.

A review of statistics published in the *American Veterinary Medical Journal*¹ gave some insight into potential preventable factors with dog bites:

- The absence of an able-bodied person to intervene (87.1%)
- Incidental or no familial relationship of victims with dogs (85.2%)
- Un-neutered dogs (84.4%)
- The weight range of most dogs was 23 to 45 kg (approx 50 to 100 lb) (79.3%)
- Compromised ability of victims to interact appropriately with dogs (77.4%)
- Dogs were kept isolated from regular positive human interactions (76.2%)
- Nearly three-quarters of the deaths occurred on the owner's property (74.2%)



- Nearly half of victims were < 5 years of age (45.3%)
- Four or more factors co-occurred in 80.5% deaths

Education programmes

Charities such as Dog's Trust and Blue Cross have had education programmes in place for many years, visiting schools and providing resources that link into the national curriculum. Perhaps, in an ideal world responsible pet ownership would be on the national curriculum?

Interestingly, earlier this year an RSPCA survey of 800 teachers across England and Wales revealed that 83 per cent felt animal welfare should be part of the national curriculum. However, some had concerns about how it would be integrated into existing frameworks, and whether it would mean more demands on already overworked teachers.

This year respected dog trainer Victoria Stilwell headlined at the UK's first National Dog Bite Prevention and Behaviour Conference in Hampshire. Organisations and individuals around the world have developed programmes and resources for schools, parents and children. The RSPCA has just released some new materials in conjunction with internationally-acclaimed vet and animal behaviourist Dr Sophia Yin, aimed at teaching children how they should and should not interact with dogs, as well as a leaflet for parents highlighting different behaviours dogs use depending on how they feel.

Dog safety, bite prevention and child education of dog behaviour is being talked about. But somehow we're just not reaching everyone. Children are still being bitten and many are not being educated about how to play and be safe around dogs.

I was unable to establish at this stage just how much (or

little) dog safety education takes place in schools generally across the UK and the world so perhaps this, along with finding out how many parents actually understand and educate their children about dog behaviour, would be a good place to start in finding out where we are missing in providing effective education.

Responsible dog ownership surely must also include teaching our families about responsible dog ownership and companionship?

We've put together a list of useful resources for family dog education on the SCAS website at <http://www.scas.org.uk/familydog>. We welcome your input into developing this list further so if you've found a useful resource we could share please do let us know.

References

1. *Co-occurrence of potentially preventable factors in 256 dog bite-related fatalities in the United States (2000–2009)* by Gary J. Patronek, VMD, PhD; Jeffrey J. Sacks, MD, MPH; Karen M. Delise; Donald V. Cleary, BA; Amy R. Marder, VMD published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association; 243:1726–1736; December 2013.
2. *Dog bites in children: A review of results from a recent European and New Zealand study (2005)*, Natalie Waran and Nelly N. Lakestani.
3. *Interpretation of Dog Behavior by Children and Young Adults (2014)* by Nelly N. Lakestani, Morag L. Donaldson and Natalie Waran. Anthrozoos, Volume 27, Issue 1, pp 65-80.
4. Health & Social Care Information Centre, *Provisional Monthly Hospital Episode Statistics for Admitted Patient Care, Outpatients and Accident and Emergency Data - April 2013 to January 2014*, accessed 10 August 2014, <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB14030>.