

Reducing the Risk to Children of Injury and Death by Dog Attacks  
***Recommendations***

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Background:

Given the close relationship that has existed between dogs and humans for more than 10,000 years, the persistent desire of people throughout the world to interact with dogs, and the enormous number of dogs that inhabit the earth, it is unreasonable to expect to be able to completely prevent all dog-related injuries or fatalities.

For the most part, dogs are scavengers with some residual predatory tendencies. They have both the physical characteristics and behaviour required to use aggression effectively. Domestication and selective breeding have resulted in varying expressions of behaviour, but this process will never completely eliminate aggression. Due to the nature of genetic inheritance, it is not possible to breed out all forms of aggressive behaviour in dogs without creating severe temperament problems associated with excessive submissiveness and anxiety. Although it is clearly not advisable to deliberately breed dogs for traits that put people or other animals at risk, the spectrum of normal behaviour will naturally result in some dogs behaving more aggressively or unpredictably in some situations.

There will always be a proportion of dogs that are inadequately supervised, inadequately socialized, and subjected to treatment that causes them to behave in a socially undesirable way. This will occur even in the absence of deliberate abuse or neglect by their caregivers. In addition, dogs can experience excitement, frustration, pain, fatigue, or fear. Any of these states can cause a dog, or a person, to behave aggressively in what may appear to be an unpredictable manner.

Although we cannot completely eliminate all dog-related injuries to people, it is clear from experience in other areas of human injury prevention, such as with the use of seat belts, that simple measures that are promoted by health care professionals and supported by legislation can have a dramatic and positive effect. It is the purpose of the following list of recommendations to encourage the development of better attitudes, policies, and legislation to diminish the risk of dog bite injuries and fatalities, particularly where children are the victims.

## **Recommendations to parents**

### **Introduction**

Not all homes and families are suitable for dog ownership. When considering adopting a dog, give full consideration to the impact this will have on your lifestyle, and whether the lifestyle you would like to have is contrary to the social and physical needs of a dog. Approximately 18 months of effort are required to shape the behaviour of a dog that will be suitable for living within a family environment. The breed of dog is less reliable as a predictor of the dog's mature temperament and behaviour than is the behaviour of the dog's parents and the degree of effort invested in socializing and training. Aside from training, part of responsible dog ownership is maintaining a lifelong awareness of situations that may disturb the dog, and taking precautionary measures to prevent problems. Any dog may bite given a sufficient degree of arousal due to excitement, play, fear, pain, territoriality, possessiveness, sexual motivations, maternal motivations, or dominance.

1. Delay dog adoption until children in the family are old enough (ie. school age) to learn how to behave around dogs, and to actually participate in the care of a dog. **Children learn about responsible pet ownership by observing their parents.** Teach all children the basics of behaviour around dogs to reduce the likelihood of aggression. They should be taught to respect the dog, and to not handle it as if it were a toy or as if it will automatically understand their intentions.
2. Deliberately **socialize** young dogs to a wide variety of different people and situations before 1 year of age. The more isolated a dog's home and the more limited its social contacts, the more important this planned early exposure becomes.
3. No preschool age child or infant should be left alone with a dog, even in an adjoining room, regardless of the dog's history and experience with children. Dogs have difficulty interpreting the behaviour of children, which they often find erratic and confusing relative to the behaviour of adults.
  - **Preschool children** have a tendency to want to touch and hug dogs. They also have an undeveloped understanding of the feelings of others or their own ability to cause pain and fear in a dog. As a result, they can unintentionally threaten or harm a dog, and will not recognize or respond appropriately to warning behaviour by

the dog. They are frequently bitten in the head and neck region because of the way they behave around dogs.

- A dog may not understand that a **newborn infant** is a person. Fatal attacks to infants typically show characteristics of predatory behaviour.
4. Recognize that dogs require frequent contact with social partners to maintain balanced behaviour. Social isolation as a result of being tied outside or kennelled excessively will predispose dogs to a wide variety of behaviour problems, including aggression.
  5. Avoid using punishment in training. This is counterproductive to producing a dog suitable for a family environment. Punishment increases fearfulness, unpredictability, and aggression in dogs. Dogs raised to trust people through reward-based training are more reliable and less likely to behave aggressively in unusual or stimulating situations. In addition, **children that have observed their parents scolding or hitting dogs are likely to mimic this behaviour themselves, inadvertently causing the dog to respond aggressively.**

## **Recommendations to municipalities**

### **Introduction**

With the understanding that a significant number of community members will continue to own dogs, but that not all dog owners will behave responsibly, it is the responsibility of municipalities to adequately fund the personnel and facilities required for effective animal control (including registration, enforcement, and public education), similar in many respects to the support provided for police, fire, and other municipal services. Municipal officials should take the lead in demonstrating respect for animal control personnel, providing a role model for community attitudes. Animal control and by-law enforcement is difficult and often dangerous work, either because the animal itself is dangerous, or more often because of the emotional reactions of owners when their animals are impounded.

1. Fund and maintain animal control **separately** from shelter/adoption facilities, as the former is a municipal responsibility and the latter are generally non-profit organizations.
2. Increase the cost of dog ownership by markedly **increasing license fees**, which can in turn be used to support animal control and by-law

enforcement. It should be noted that if enforcement is not increased when license fees are increased, compliance can be expected to decrease. All dogs should be neutered unless they are purebred, registered, and kept specifically for breeding. Neutering should be required in order to obtain a permanent adult license. Ownership of intact purebred dogs kept for breeding purposes should require a special "facility" license.

3. Dogs which are found running at large should be **microchipped** (to be paid for by the owner) for permanent accurate identification before return to the owner.
4. Maintain an accurate and up-to-date **database** for license and microchip data, including any reports of nuisance or dangerous behaviour. Veterinarians could be electronically linked to this database, to provide the municipality with information regarding the behaviour, death (euthanasia), or change of ownership of licensed dogs.
5. Adopt and enforce **dog by-laws** which will restrict or prevent the ownership of dogs by individuals who have demonstrated themselves to be irresponsible in the following ways:
  - allowing dogs to repeatedly run at large
  - having unlicensed dogs
  - supplying inadequate care to dogs, such as by tying them for prolonged periods (note: the passage of federal legislation Bill C-10B would enhance the ability to prosecute overt animal abuse and neglect)
  - failure to respond to requests to resolve problems with nuisance behaviour such as excessive barking
6. Adopt and enforce **dangerous dog by-laws** to restrict or prevent the ownership of dogs by individuals who have demonstrated themselves to be irresponsible, and to provide a process for appropriate decisions regarding the humane destruction of dangerous dogs. Banning particular dog breeds is unlikely to be effective in reducing the number of serious incidents in the long-term, unless steps are taken to prevent irresponsible owners from adopting a different type of dog. The greatest proportion of dogs bites are inflicted by family dogs of no specific breed who bite a member of the immediate family. Pre-defined criteria should be in place for classifying or ranking the level

of risk to the public based on the history of individual dogs and owners. Criteria could include:

- behaviour leading to the injury or death of other domestic animals
- threatening behaviour that affects the ability of people to enjoy a sense of security on or near their own property or in public areas
- situations of injury to people, taking into account the severity of the injury and the predictability of the dog's behaviour
- the ability of the owner to control the behaviour of the dog, or conversely, any evidence that the owner is deliberately causing aggressive behaviour by the dog.

### **Recommendations to family physicians, pediatricians, and public health nurses**

1. Approach dog bite injuries or fatalities as a largely preventable event, not an accident.
2. Support programs that educate children (in school or on television) about appropriate behaviour around animals and respect for animals.
3. Recognize the strong emotional bond that may exist between owners and their pets, even when the pet is showing undesirable behaviour. The human-animal bond is an outcome of normal human social behaviour towards dependent individuals. Breaking this bond may be emotionally difficult, even when a dog has behaved aggressively.
4. Educate new parents as to the risks associated with dog-child interactions. There are five major situations which may lead to serious injury or death in children by dogs:
  - an **unattended newborn** left alone with the family dog.
  - a **toddler** interacting with the family dog or a dog known to the family. The dog may not have any history of aggression towards children. Most dog bites to this age group occur when the parents are present but in another room. This is probably the most common situation for serious injuries to children.

- an unattended younger child interacting with a dog that is either roaming or tied in the neighbourhood, **beyond the immediate supervision of adults**.
  - a school age child, playing with friends, riding their bike or delivering newspapers etc. Attacks may be related to factors such as territorial behaviour, the movement of the victim, or the fact that they are carrying an object.
  - **poorly supervised dogs**, particularly in groups, attacking a person of any age.
5. Actively discourage dog ownership in families with preschool children who do not already own a dog. A more appropriate time for dog adoption is when the youngest child in the family is entering school.
  6. Participate in any systematic (municipal, provincial, Health Canada) **documentation** of the occurrence of dog bites to children. Report dog bite injuries to animal control or police. Dog bites should be reported regardless of the ownership of the dog or its relationship with the victim. Dog bites to family members by the family dog are typically undocumented until the behaviour becomes more dangerous and the victim is taken to an emergency room. Documentation will also encourage financial support of animal control services and the enforcement of dangerous dog by-laws.
  7. Be aware of the **strong association between child abuse and animal abuse**. In the interest of humane treatment of animals as well as children, contact your local humane society if you suspect that an animal may be at risk based on evidence of abuse to children in the same household.

### **Recommendations to veterinarians**

1. Support and implement **early age neutering** to reduce the number of dogs who are easily available to irresponsible or unprepared adopters.
2. Actively **counsel** clients on:
  - the timing of dog adoption relative to the age of children in the family. Dissuade dog adoption in homes with small children.
  - the choice of an appropriate pet (dog, cat, or other)

- management of dogs to prevent bites
  - preparing dogs for life with a new baby in the home
  - teaching children to behave responsibly around pets
3. Promote **positive dog socialization** experiences through:
    - puppy classes
    - fenced dog parks
    - dog trainers who use positive reinforcement methods
  4. **Follow-up** on owner comments regarding aggressive behaviour, fearfulness, or training problems. Encourage owners to use training methods (reward-based) that will reduce the likelihood of aggression.
  5. Be supportive of owners who are electing to **euthanize** their dog because of a legitimate problem with aggression, particularly if the dog shows a high level of reactivity or unpredictability. Dogs with a history of having bitten are more likely to bite again, and the only way to guarantee a dog will not bite is to euthanize it. Behaviour modification is helpful in reducing the likelihood of aggressive behaviour in some situations, but not all.
  6. Develop a cooperative relationship with the local humane society and animal control.
  7. Be proactive in drawing information about problem animals or situations to the attention of the humane society or animal control. It is not considered a violation of the veterinary-client relationship to report cases of suspected animal abuse or neglect. Document all evidence as thoroughly as possible.
  8. **Actively oppose the breeding of any dogs without adequate regard to temperament.**