

## Possible format for dog behaviour awareness courses

- All attendees should be asked what their dogs have done that has brought them to the attention of the authorities. They should also be asked for their view of why their dogs have behaved in such a way and how their own action or inaction contributed to the perceived problem. Common reasons might be excessive barking when dogs are left alone in the house or garden, lack of reliable recall at exercise and antagonistic behaviour towards other dogs, as well as territorial aggression towards people viewed by dogs as intruders. A paradox for all dogs is that behaviour such as being loyal and protective is considered appropriate and desirable in some circumstances, yet in others is condemned as dangerous. The message throughout should be that aggression towards people in any circumstance is unacceptable.
- Statistical and other information should be presented and discussed regarding the

incidence and nature of dog bite injuries; their cost to the NHS; the traumatic physical and mental effect on victims and their families; the fact that children are over-represented in dog bite injuries; and that most bites occur in the home by a dog known to the victim.

- Attendees should be also made aware of the effects of seizure of an offending animal and welfare concerns and considerations for the dogs themselves, as well as the costs of long-term kennelling and court action to the public purse.

- Inclusion of information on current thinking on dog behaviour and the dog-human relationship will be essential. There needs to be better recognition of the factors that contribute to the perception and creation of dangerous behaviour, and topics covered should include: the contributions of normal dog activity, such as jumping up, barking and over-excited

play; training failure, such as lack of recall; punishing training techniques relying on threat; as well as a dog's emotions, such as of fear. A dog's perception of threat, the underlying emotion of fear and a (behaviourally normal) aggressive response features in the majority of 'dangerous dog' incidents but, once these are understood, dangerous situations can be predicted and prevented. It is a dog's fear, and the contexts that resulted in it, that must be addressed and prevented, rather than simply the risk of future biting. Humane and non-threatening training and communication methods should be covered, as well as society's paradoxical expectations of dogs – aggression being condoned and lauded if the victim is up to no good, but condemned as a criminal offence if the victim is a next-door neighbour. The perceptions, motivation and actions of the dog will be the same in each case.

is vital in order to predict and prevent potentially dangerous behaviour, rather than depending solely on punishment afterwards for an unpredicted event.

I therefore suggest that dog owners whose dogs have shown concerning behaviour should be compelled to attend a dog behaviour awareness course on the same grounds and with the same aims as those drivers who exceed the speed limit, in that their dog's behaviour is as likely to cause alarm or injury as a car that is driven too fast. Individual assessment of a dog by regionally based panels of accredited experts in canine behaviour, as well as the dog-human relationship, may also be required to determine the degree of risk posed by both dog and owner.

**'Imparting information about the common risk factors for dog bite incidents is vital in order to predict and prevent potentially dangerous behaviour, rather than depending solely on punishment afterwards for an unpredicted event'**

Drivers exceeding the speed limit are picked up by appropriately sited cameras or by police-operated mobile units. Dog owners whose dogs are causing concern have to be reported to the appropriate authorities, such as local dog wardens or the police. At present, there appears to be no obligation for mandatory intervention unless a definable offence is suspected and can be thought to be proved. There can be no better example of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. The level

of response varies hugely according to area, local authority and the individual interest and ability of relevant personnel. Even if a visit to the household is triggered, the standard of advice given is often deficient owing to lack of up-to-date behavioural information and human and dog training skills. A preventive approach involving mandatory attendance at a dog behaviour awareness course might prove helpful in, for example, reducing injuries to postal workers by changing the behaviour of owners who routinely allow their dogs to be outside unattended and to fence-run and bark at all passers-by. What might be considered a desirable activity in a 'protective and loyal' dog is also potentially dangerous and could, under the current proposals, result in a criminal offence.

Using the principles applied in speed awareness courses, a dog behaviour awareness workshop could follow the format outlined in the box above.

Ultimately, the only 'safe' dog is one that has been bred, reared and taught to understand that contact with human skin is never acceptable and that can be assured as far as possible never to feel the need to bite in the first place. Any amendment to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 which condones canine aggression on one hand but makes it illegal on the other, while ignoring the need for education, demonstrates a lack of understanding of dog behaviour and, like the original act, will be brought into disrepute.

The responsibility lies with society to decide the nature of the dogs we want and ensure the creation, from conception onwards, of dogs that we

consider acceptable. We need to improve understanding of how human actions

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inadvertently contribute to a dog's need for aggression, and including such education in the National Curriculum (in the same way as is done for other potential health risks) would go a long way in helping to achieve this (Shepherd 2012).

Veterinary surgeons can contribute to the educational process by understanding that unacceptable behaviours, particularly aggression, have much the same aetiology in a surgery context as in any other situation. By routinely discussing dog behaviour in all its aspects, as well as demonstrating humane and non-threatening means of communicating with dogs while under their care, veterinary attention could help to prevent canine aggression in a much wider context (Shepherd 2007).

### References

- SHEPHERD, K. (2007) Behavioural husbandry: the way to a client's heart. *In Practice* 29, 540-544
- SHEPHERD, K. (2012) Keeping ourselves safe near dogs. Classroom teaching resource. Association of the Study of Animal Behaviour. [asab.nottingham.ac.uk/education](http://asab.nottingham.ac.uk/education)

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