

# How to prevent dog bites - the Canine Good Citizen

**Dr Kersti Seksel**

## **ABSTRACT**

The Canine Good Citizen is the dog that we would love to own. The dog that we would want living next door. The dog that knows how to interact well with other dogs and people and that is accepted wherever he goes.

This dog has an owner that appreciates that owning a dog brings with it many pleasures as well as responsibilities.

The Canine Good Citizen program is designed to help dogs and owners learn together, in a fun and informative way, to be good citizens on both ends of the lead so that all of our community can benefit from pet ownership.

## **THE BENEFITS OF CANINE GOOD CITIZENS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dogs are an integral part of our society. An estimated 60% of Australians now share their homes with one or more pets and 68% of these households care for one or more dogs (McHarg 1995).

Over the years we have come to recognise the many advantages that pet ownership brings. Pets provide us with companionship, security and numerous health benefits. Studies have shown that we are 12% less likely to visit the doctor and even less likely to be on long term medication if we own a pet. (Friedmann 1990, Headley 1995).

However, pet ownership brings with it many responsibilities and there are also other considerations in pet ownership. Pets can cause allergies, they cost money to look after properly and require considerable amounts of time.

Many owners find that they cannot cope with the pressures of dog ownership. They are unable to deal with a dog that roams, barks, jumps up on them, digs holes or acts aggressively and they have no idea where to seek help. These are, of course, all normal behaviours of dogs but are considered by many to be socially unacceptable.

So, sadly, each year up to 20% of these urban dogs are surrendered to pounds and animal shelters and of these 80% are euthanased (Murray and Penridge 1992). In 1990 J. Norris, Ku-Ring-Gai Municipal Council's Dog Control Officer, surveyed animal shelters and pounds and estimated that more than 300,000 dogs were euthanased in NSW alone (personal communication). In the United States in 1989 about 20 million dogs were surrendered to animal shelters. Surveys indicated that 50-80% of these dogs were given up because of behaviour problems (Burghardt 1991). No doubt the same would be true in Australia.

Incredible as it seems, the average age of dogs in Australia is only 3½ years!! (Jennens 1995). In fact the largest cause of death of puppies under one year of age is euthanasia due to behaviour problems and is not due to accidents or illness. So despite recent advances in veterinary medicine that enable veterinarians to treat many geriatric problems and even perform kidney transplants, the average pet does not grow old enough to benefit.

It is a myth that "there are no bad dogs, only bad owners". In fact, there are bad owners but there are also bad dogs. Some good owners end up owning bad dogs and some good owners become bad owners because they are not aware of normal dog behaviour.

The first step towards having less "bad" dogs is to educate the potential pet owners. For some people the ideal pet for their lifestyle may not be a dog, but rather a goldfish or even having no pet at all. We must educate new pet owners in all aspects of pet care and responsible pet ownership.

Problems with urban animals are one of Council's most difficult and persistent neighbourhood problems. In some Council areas complaints about dogs comprise about 25 % of the total number of complaints received (pers com). These complaints range from barking and roaming, to fouling the streets and parks, to the most serious of all - aggression directed towards other dogs and or towards people.

There are many reasons why dogs bite. Dealing with diagnosis of the types of aggression, their causes, prognosis and the appropriate therapy is beyond the scope of this paper, but one way we may be able to help prevent some types of aggression is by educating owners about their dogs and their behaviour.

Owners need to be properly educated along with their dogs on how to cope with the situations faced in everyday modern urban life. Imposing heavy fines and introducing harsher legislations in an attempt to resolve the problem will not work until owners understand the underlying causes of their dog's behaviour.

In my opinion, as a veterinarian, an animal behaviour consultant and a member of the general community, the Canine Good Citizen program is a very good starting point. If we are to have less problem dogs we need more canine good citizens.

### **CANINE GOOD CITIZEN PROGRAM (C.G.C.)**

Not everyone wants their dog to do a perfect figure of eight. For most owners ( and dogs ) it is not an essential skill required to be a good pet. If an owner can't even manage to call their dog and get it to come in the first place it is obvious that there is not much relevance in performing a perfect figure of 8.

The Canine Good Citizen program is not just another obedience competition and should not be considered as such. It has been designed to assess a dog's practical skills for living in the home and in the community. It has been designed for all dogs, large and small, old and young and not just purebreds. Most importantly it is designed to be FUN, as well as beneficial and relevant, as all community oriented training classes should be!

The C.G.C. program is a structured 10 week course with a beginning and a definite end. The C.G.C. program is designed to produce happy, well adjusted dogs and responsible, well informed owners - "Good Citizens on Both Ends of the Leash".

C.G.C. aims for:

- A dog **you** would like to own
- A dog **you** would welcome as a neighbour
- A dog that can **socialise** with other dogs
- A dog that can **cope** with the stresses of modern living
- A dog that is **accepted** by the wider community
- An owner that is fully informed on all aspects of **responsible pet ownership**

Owners who want to go further with competition work are encouraged to do so and further their skills if they wish.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE C.G.C.**

It has been estimated that the drop out rate in dog obedience classes in the U.S.A. is about 55%. Less than a quarter of 1% of registered dogs in the USA ever compete in obedience at any stage (Carpenter 1993). The figure for unregistered dogs is probably even less! The figures in Australia would probably be comparable. There are many possible reasons for this. One reason may be that the training needs of the owners are not being met at standard obedience classes. Most dog owners really just want a well behaved dog. They just want, or need, to learn how to teach their dog to "come", "sit", "drop", "stay" and not to pull on a lead. But generally the classes are geared towards competition and owners with "problem" dogs often feel ostracised or are expelled because their dog disrupts the class.

In 1989 James Dearing, the secretary of the American Kennel Club, introduced the C.G.C. concept in response to rising anti-dog feeling in the USA. Since then this program has proved to be a huge success with over 220,00 canine good citizens in the USA alone. Many States in the USA have passed resolutions supporting the program and it is now also used in England, Japan and Europe. In the USA the Guide Dogs for the Blind, Therapy Dogs International and Canine Companions for Independence have included the C.G.C. test in their training programs.

In Australia the C.G.C. was officially started in South Australia in April 1992. It started as a six month pilot program funded by the S.A. Government's Dog Advisory Committee. Three organisations - the South Australian Canine Association, the Australian Veterinary Association and "Life Be In It" - combined to produce a unique multifaceted Australian program. This included three parts:

1. Training (S.A. Canine Association)
2. Education (Australian Veterinary Association)
3. Recreation ("Life Be In It")

While in the USA there is often no official training program, just a fun day with dogs and owners invited to take the test, it was felt in Australia that more was needed. A six week program was devised, after which the C.G.C. test could be taken.

In NSW the C.G.C. program was started independently in July 1992 by People -Pet Partnership (Australia) Assoc Inc (P.P.P.). They were also concerned with the high drop out rate at obedience schools and what then happened to these dogs. The P.P.P. have now become involved not only with dog training but also with hospital visitations and the "Prevent a Bite" program.

In June 1994, P.P.P. joined with the NSW Animal Welfare League to further the C.G.C. program and the Canine Good Citizen is now a Trademark registered in joint names. In March 1995 they initiated an on-going Canine Good Citizen Instructors course which should see many well informed instructors running similar courses Australia wide. The first group of accredited Canine Good Citizen Instructors graduated in March 1996 and the next course is underway.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CANINE GOOD CITIZEN PROGRAM**

The NSW C.G.C. program adopted the three components of the South Australian program and then designed a 10 week step by step program. Over the four years the program has developed and evolved and even now it is constantly being updated and evaluated to ensure that the best possible program is used and that it keeps up to date with new knowledge. The original test has been altered and the factors of road safety and "come when called" have been incorporated. The dogs are taught basic obedience commands such as "come", "sit", "stay" and "drop" as well as how to walk nicely on a loose lead. They are also required to show confidence and control when faced with another dog or other distractions. They must also be able to be left alone and show good manners. The dogs are taken into real life situations, such as street walks and visits to the veterinary surgery, to assess their proficiency.

The program differs from traditional training in a number of ways:

- It aims to teach the owners why their dogs are behaving the way they are. It looks at the causes as well as the solutions.
- There are only 5-6 dogs per trainer. This allows for more personal attention.
- The dogs are grouped according to their proficiency or their behaviour problem. This has obvious advantages as problems can be dealt with appropriately.
- The same trainer stays with the group for the full 10 weeks. This means that the trainer is fully aware of the progress each dog and owner is making which makes it much less disruptive to the class.
- Training in the C.G.C. program focuses on the use of positive reinforcement and operant conditioning. It is reward based training and the use of food, games or a special toy as a motivator is encouraged.
- The use of head collars and flat collars is encouraged as a sensible and humane training method rather than using force or choke chains. It is now well recognised that using punishment as a means of changing behaviour is one of the least effective methods available!
- Important aspects include socialisation with other dogs and people, community dog walks and fun activities such as agility and games.
- It is a structured course conducted over 10 weeks. It is based on teaching dogs good manners in real life situations.

There are three main components to today's Canine Good Citizen Program:

1. Behavioural training using positive motivational methods. The instructors have to know traditional training methods as well as have knowledge of behavioural training. They need to have an understanding of canine behaviour, how to help in solving simple behaviour problems, and basic companion dog obedience.
2. Education for pet owners. The owners are taught about the responsibilities of dog ownership, the dog laws, health care, desexing, grooming, diet, worming, vaccinations, microchipping and basic first aid as well as normal dog behaviour.
3. Emphasis is on training for "real life" situations, socialisation, recreation and enjoyment of dogs. When the dogs have successfully completed the C.G.C program they are awarded a certificate and a distinctive numbered lead that can be easily identified in the street. Dogs that have completed the C.G.C. program should prove to be better companions and pets, show dogs, obedience trialing dogs, agility dogs and animal assisted activity dogs.

## **BENEFITS FOR COUNCILS**

Stricter rules, harsher legislations and higher fines are unlikely to resolve the urban animal management problem alone. Punishment is not an effective means of changing behaviour in dogs or people! Education of the public (pet owners and non pet owners alike) along with the pets, is an essential step if we are to improve the problems now faced in urban animal management.

Better behaved dogs mean that there are less complaints and neighbourhood disputes and less problems for Councils. Early training of dogs and their owners through well run Puppy Preschools may help prevent many dog problems by making owners aware of their dog, its behaviour and their responsibilities in owning a dog. The continued training and education of the dog and its owner through the Canine Good Citizen program should also help in decreasing the numbers of antisocial dogs.

However, if there are problems with dogs - for example with barking, roaming or biting - the C.G.C. instructor should be able to help, or at least refer the owners to expert help regarding these problems as not all dog problems are solved by just training alone. In general the C.G.C. instructor should be equipped to handle basic problems and to help overcome them. Hence they can provide a valuable resource for Councils.

Councils can and should encourage dog owners to attend Puppy Preschools and Canine Good Citizen courses at every opportunity. In this way they can help minimise complaints and help their local community live in harmony with its pets.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Canine Good Citizen Program is more than just dog training. It is more than just teaching dogs to sit, to stay and to come. It is about helping dogs and people live harmoniously together and increasing the human animal bond. It is about dealing with the whole dog and its relationship with the owner as well as its relationships with other people and other dogs. It is also about recognising problems, being equipped to deal with them and knowing when to refer to expert help such as a veterinarian or animal behaviour consultant (Judson 1996).

The C.G.C. program should not be viewed as just another obedience training program but as a valuable resource to help the problem dog and the owner not only to re-enter the community but also to be a productive member of that community.

But it is also very important to remember that the program is designed for ALL dogs, not just problem dogs. If Councils actively encourage all dogs and owners to attend Canine Good Citizen courses this can only benefit the community as a whole.

Dogs are not born trained nor are their owners born knowing how to train them. Just as we educate our children we must educate our dogs and owners!

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr Kersti Seksel

B.V.Sc.(Hons), M.R.C.V.S., B.A., M.A.C.V.Sc. (Animal Behaviour)

Seaforth Veterinary Hospital

55 Ethel Street

Seaforth NSW 2092

Telephone: (02) 99491288

Fax: (02) 99496364

Graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University in 1977, then worked in small animal practice in Sydney, then in U.K. Graduated from Macquarie University in 1990 with BA in Behavioural Sciences with major interest in psychology. Presently engaged in MA(hons) in animal behaviour at Macquarie University. NSW Veterinary Surgeons Board registered Animal Behaviour Consultant. Member American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. Member Australasian Society for the Study of Animal Behaviour. Member Delta Society. Currently partner in multi-person small animal practice in Seaforth, Sydney with special interest in animal behaviour problems. Actively involved in developing and running Puppy and Kitten Training Courses. Patron People-Pet Partnership, Canine Good Citizen programme, Sydney.

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