

Dangerous dog declarations and seizures: The owner's perspective

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Dog bites, especially when children are involved, are a very emotive issue for all the community. Pictures of a child's bloody and swollen face with numerous stitches on the front page of a newspaper attract enormous attention and understandably spark great community outrage. There are immediate cries from many for the dog concerned to be killed immediately, or at the very least be declared dangerous and then seized, to protect the "innocent" public.

But is the problem of dog bites as easy as that to solve?

Will "getting rid of the dog" actually decrease the number of dog attacks?

Will these measures actually lead to a safer society in which the rest of us can live?

Before possible answers to the above questions are considered it is important to reflect on how a socially responsible owner of a dog might feel when their loyal companion of many years is labelled dangerous, is seized or is destroyed?

The key words to consider in relation to the owner are *socially responsible*. This is very different from an owner of a dog that perceives that all they have to do is perhaps to feed and water the dog and have no concerns on how the dog may impact on the community in which they live. It is only the socially responsible owner and the impact of their dog being declared dangerous or seized that will be considered in this paper.

So will killing the dog immediately, or at the very least declaring it dangerous and then seizing it solve the problem of dog bites?

The simple answer to the first question is a resounding no! As has been shown in overseas research, the number of dog attacks will not decrease by simply banning breeds or declaring a particular breed of dog dangerous. Why? Because all dogs can bite! Dog bites are a function of not only genetics, but also previous experiences as well as the situation in which the dog finds itself. It is an individual dog issue, not a breed issue. So what can be done to minimise the number of dog attacks and protect the innocent public?

Part of the solution lies with education. Educating the community about our canine friends has been shown to be the most effective way of reducing the number of dog attacks. This community education needs to include teaching the dog owning public as well as the non - dog owning public about canine behaviour. The education programme has to include teaching the community about the true facts about dogs. This programme also needs to dispel the many myths and legends that abound about our canine companions such as "dominance" and "alpha" that have been misguidedly extrapolated from the study of wolf behaviour. This education programme also needs to include teaching dogs about how to live in our community. This way over time, our society will be better able to understand dogs and dogs will be better able to live with us.

But how does the *socially responsible* owner feel when their dog is declared dangerous and possibly seized?

There is, unfortunately, no simple answer to this question.

There are a number of important issues that need to be considered when looking at this issue. These include what the dog has actually done to be declared dangerous or seized.

Has the dog attacked and bitten or has it just threatened? Who or what was the target of the aggression? Was it a child, an adult, an elderly or disabled person or was it another animal? Has the dog inflicted serious injury to the victim, has the dog killed the victim or has the dog just threatened the victim? All of these factors will influence how the owner will feel and the size and breed of the dog will also further complicate the issue. But most importantly, what was the context in which the dog reacted the way it did.

So the answer to how owners may perceive their dog being declared dangerous or seized appears to lie with not only the owner of the dog and why they own the dog but also who or what was the target of the attack and the context in which the dog reacted. Different examples will be discussed to illustrate the complexity of the issue.

Veterinary behaviourists are often called upon to assess dogs that have been declared dangerous or seized. Many of these dogs have lived happily in their family for many years and have previously never been involved in any aggressive incident. The owners that come to seek advice from veterinary behaviourists express many emotions at this time, and these emotions are often similar to those emotions that people experience when there is a death in the family.

Of course there are always owners who do not care about their dog, or almost take pride in having a dangerous dog. However, these owners are not likely to seek the help of a veterinary behaviourist.

There are five generally accepted stages that people experience when faced with death or dying. These stages include firstly denial and isolation, then anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. These emotions are in part influenced by the society and culture we live in.

So why would a socially responsible owner experience similar emotions to when someone close to them dies or is dying when their dog is declared dangerous?

The cases where owners seek advice from veterinary behaviourists generally involve dogs that have been an integral part of the family unit. These dogs are trusted friends who may sleep in the same bed as the owners and share their meals. In many cases the dog may not have shown any signs of aggression previously so the incident has come as a complete surprise. In many cases it was just an accident or the dog was provoked, either deliberately or accidentally.

However, there are other cases where the dog may have exhibited some signs of aggression previously but the owner did not feel it was a major concern. This may have been because the owner felt that aggression was normal for dogs, they may actually have acquired the dog as protection for themselves and the family or they felt the dog was doing "what comes naturally" so the behaviour was acceptable from their perspective.

So why would the owner go through the emotion of feelings of denial and isolation?

If their dog had never exhibited any signs of aggression previously it should be quite obvious that owners would say "not my dog" or make similar statements. However, even if the dog had exhibited signs of growling the circumstances of the incident may make the owner feel as if the dog had been unnecessarily victimised.

The context of the incident will contribute to this perception of the owner. Dogs that have concurrent medical problems, such as arthritis or other painful conditions are especially likely to react in situations that they perceive to be threatening.

Denial can also be a natural response of owners if they consider their dog is their trusted friend or companion. They may feel betrayed by the dog as it has let down the "hand that feeds them".

An owner may feel isolated if they feel that their dog has been singled out from other dogs in the community that behave in the same or similar ways. Additionally, the owner may feel it is a reflection on themselves as being a bad owner. This notion of being a bad owner is often reflected in an old mistaken belief that "there are no bad dogs only bad owners".

So how can you help these owners as an AMO and why should you care?

First of all there are many emotions that owners go through when their family pet is declared dangerous that need to be considered. These owners are not only shocked and surprised but they may also be in denial, as well as angry and defensive.

So as an AMO the caring factor is about in gathering facts in an objective manner. Then providing support in an objective manner. The amount of support given will depend on what each jurisdiction can provide. Additionally, understanding the difference between a socially irresponsible and socially responsible owner will be an essential element defining any problem, and the solution will mean including them in any discussions of the problem.

Further reading:

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Kersti graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University and became very interested in animal behaviour while working overseas. To further her knowledge she went back to university graduating from Macquarie University with a BA in Behavioural Sciences with a major in psychology. In 1992 she began developing the program of Puppy Preschools in veterinary hospitals around Australia. This interest led her to complete a MA (Hons) degree by thesis on the long and short term behavioural effects of puppy socialisation and training programs. She is a registered specialist in Animal Behaviour, a Fellow of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Behaviour and a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

Kersti is the principal of a specialist referral only practice for animal behaviour in Sydney employing 3 other veterinary behaviourists. She is the President of the Australian Veterinary Association, President of the Australian Companion Animal Council, chair of the Companion Animal sectoral group of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy, past president of the Australian Veterinary behaviour interest group and is a Council member of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists.

Kersti has presented at conferences and meetings in Australia, NZ, UK, Europe, USA, China and Japan. She has published numerous papers on animal behaviour in scientific journals, magazines and periodicals and is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. Currently she is a regular presenter on ABC radio on pet care and behaviour as well as a consultant on VIN.