

A dangerous occupation: Dealing with dogs, an OH&S issue

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Abstract

Many employees of councils and shelters have to routinely deal with potentially dangerous dogs and situations. Working with dogs carries a risk. All dogs are capable of biting and some have already done so, making routine procedures such as catching and handling dogs potentially dangerous for those concerned. Minimising the risk is of prime importance. Understanding dog behaviour, human behaviour, organisational procedures and occupational health and safety requirements are discussed with a view to minimising the risk involved for all people who have to encounter dogs within their employment role.

Introduction

Working with dogs carries a risk. Many employees of councils and shelters have to deal with potentially dangerous dogs and situations. In fact, anyone who works with dogs is at risk, although it should be remembered that most dogs choose not to bite us.

Occupational health and safety laws exist to ensure the health, safety and welfare at the workplace while undertaking work activities. Employers whose employees work with dogs need to take the safety of employees into account. All dogs are capable of biting and some have already done so (before being brought into care), making routine procedures such as approaching, catching and handling dogs, potentially dangerous activities for those concerned.

Understand dogs and dog behaviour

Understanding dog behaviour is essential for anyone that works with dogs. Dog behaviour has genetic components – the ancestry of the breed and the parents' and grandparents looks and temperaments – and environmental components – the dog's lifestyle and learning. The way a dog behaves depends on the circumstances at any particular point in time. Generally when dogs feel threatened or frightened in any way there is a chance they may attack when approached.

Aggression in dogs has many causes, including predatory (to obtain food), maternal (to protect young), hierarchical or household (to gain status), territorial (to protect shelter and food) and interdog (competition between rivals). Many dog bites are fear-based, where the dog does not necessarily want to bite but feels threatened or frightened in some way. It is helpful to understand why a dog is displaying aggressive behaviours but the potential end result of all types of aggression is the same – a bite.

An understanding and ability to recognise canine body language is essential. Compare the two dogs below. Identifying body language takes practice and opportunity to do this is controlled and supervised circumstances. Some breeds and some individuals are easier to read than others.



Assertive Body Language



Aggressive Body Language

Handling dogs & minimising risk

Based on this understanding of dog behaviour and body language, there are ways to approach dogs that will lessen the chances of being attacked. Minimising movements, avoiding eye contact and avoiding contact with the dog's face (teeth), are strategies that work for the majority of handlers.

Particularly dangerous situations apply where dog handlers have to intervene in a potentially dangerous situation. A dog fight or a situation where a dog is protecting or guarding territory, belongings or another person are relatively common scenarios and carry a high level of risk.

There is also a danger where, due to lack of canine socialisation or previous negative encounters, dogs are wary of the person attempting to approach them. This may be because of their uniform, due to the person's gender or simply because the person approaching made eye contact with the dog. Unless the dog is known to the person approaching, it is usually impossible to predict the dog's reaction and we must err on the side of caution.

Dogs may also demonstrate behaviour that differs from the canine norm. This may be due to genetic factors or because the dogs have had specific training to behave this way eg. guard dogs, dog trained to fight.

Workplace training

A safe work culture includes management concern, employee care and cooperation, and consultation and communication between employer and employee. Potential areas of concern within the working environment need to be addressed and procedures adopted that minimise risk.

Working with animals is often put to the bottom of the priority list when it comes to the variety of roles that are necessary in a community organisation such as local councils. It is assumed that all who work with animals will have the pre-requisite skills and knowledge. This is not always the case.

People who work with dogs have varying levels of experience and expertise. They often feel a sense of trepidation, and sometimes even fear at approaching unknown dogs. There can also be a sense of embarrassment due to the public's expectation that anyone who works with dogs should know how to handle them. Alternatively some handlers feel overly confident and sometimes this can result in attack in approaching an overly aggressive or fearful dog.

It is within the employer's duty of care to ensure that employee's are safe in their designated roles. This may include the provision of necessary equipment and having a policy of back up support during the potentially dangerous situation. It is also vital that employers enable their employees to learn about dogs and how to minimise any potential dangers. On-going education is therefore a necessary part of the job.

There are a variety of educators in the community, each delivering their own variety of theoretical and practical applications in the field of dog safety. Anyone who works with animals is encouraged to seek as much knowledge as they can to maximise their safety in their employment role.

Joanne Righetti

Dr Joanne Righetti is involved in canine education on aggression in several ways:

- With the Animal Welfare League NSW, Joanne has developed a training program for councils "Council Training in Dog Behaviour" which includes education on dog behaviour, body language and aggression, the use of equipment in handling animals and discussion of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and other applicable laws. This is taught through individual councils or groups of councils by Dr Joanne and an AWL Inspector.
- Dr Joanne is also available to discuss individual council's concerns with animals and their behaviour, aggression or otherwise
- The Delta Dog Safe Program is a national dog bite prevention education and health campaign. School children are taught how to behave around dogs and how to approach and interact with a dog to minimise risk of being bitten. Joanne conducts the training for vets, vet nurses, trainers, teachers and volunteers who attend classrooms around Australia.
- Joanne consults with dog owners privately in a Sydney vet clinic. Dog aggression problems, either dog to human or dog to dog, are addressed and a behaviour treatment program is designed for the dog and owner.

Further information is available from Dr Joanne on 0414 561 699 or at www.petproblemsolved.com.au.

Notes
