

PLACING CHILDREN WITH DOG-OWNING FAMILIES

Introduction

This Practice Note is designed to offer some guidance to social workers, carers and members of adoption and fostering panels on the question of dogs in foster families and adoptive families. It identifies the context surrounding the subject, looks at the relevant legislation, specifies issues to be clarified in the care and management of dogs in the home, and explores the potential benefits and disadvantages for a child of being placed in a household where there is a dog.

While many of the matters addressed in relation to dogs and children will be equally relevant to other animals, it is not the intention of this note to explore issues surrounding other pets, domestic livestock or exotic companion animals.

Context

It is estimated that there are over six million dogs in Great Britain today. This means that approximately one in four homes has a dog. Dogs are, therefore, a prominent feature in our society. Children often have a marked interest in animals, especially dogs, may well have been brought up with dogs prior to becoming looked after and, for many, the dog is a significant member of the family and a very real friend (Thomas *et al*, 1999).

Attitudes to dogs vary considerably and are not always consistent, however. Dogs are traditionally portrayed as “man’s best friend”, capable of providing great loyalty and protection and contributing considerably to the overall quality of life of many individuals. The dog also performs many useful tasks for humans as a guide dog, guard, police dog, search and rescue worker, sniffer dog, hearing dog for the deaf, trained aide for the disabled, PAT dog (Pets as Therapy – visiting hospitals, residential homes, etc.) as well as working on farms and estates. These roles are greatly valued but the dog is also seen by many as a nuisance, noisy and intimidating and the creature responsible for fouling the streets, parks and

beaches. Cultural factors may also have a bearing on how dogs are regarded. Dog owners in turn, therefore, are viewed positively or negatively and can sometimes be seen as irresponsible, or dismissed as being over- sentimental and unrealistic where their pets are concerned. Childless applicants for adoption or fostering can also find themselves facing assumptions that their dog is “a substitute child”.

Dogs do present dangers and risks, of course, and these must never be minimised. There have been occurrences where children have been injured or, tragically, even killed by dogs. Inevitably, such incidents, although rare, receive high media attention which, while warranted, has not always been well informed, has frequently been sensational and emotive and has often singled out specific breeds as “killers” or “devil dogs”. Such high profile and dramatic coverage has caused many social work agencies to introduce policies on dogs and some, for example, will not approve substitute families owning a Rottweiler. Many more use foster care agreements which require notification to the agency should the family at any point own a dog which is or becomes registered under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (see below). Adoption and fostering panel members have become understandably worried about recommending the placement of children in dog-owning families and in an attempt to address such worries, some agencies have developed checklists or questionnaires for assessing social workers to use to provide information on the dog, its temperament and the arrangements for its care. Fears that a child may be attacked, therefore, or that his or her health may be compromised by the household dog, have justifiably brought consideration of substitute carers who own a pet dog under even closer scrutiny.

Dog breeds

The governing body of the world of dogs in the United Kingdom is the Kennel Club.* It recognises 196 breeds, broadly classified in line with their original function under two main headings, sporting or non-

* The Kennel Club, 1-5 Clarges Street, Piccadilly, London W1Y 8AB.

sporting dogs. Sporting dogs are further classified into three groups: Terriers such as Cairns, Scottish Terriers, West Highland White Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers; Gundogs like Cocker Spaniels, Golden Retrievers, Irish Setters and Weimaraners; and Hounds, for example, Beagles, Whippets, Basset Hounds and Dachshunds. The non-sporting dogs are divided into the Pastoral Group, for example, Border Collies, Corgis, Shetland Sheepdogs and German Shepherd Dogs (Alsatian); the Working Group which contains among others the Bullmastiff, Rottweiler, Boxer and Dobermann; the Utility Group including Dalmatians, Akitas, Poodles and Shih Tzus; and the Toy Group where Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Pekingese, Bichon Frisés and Yorkshire Terriers are to be found. All pure breeds of dog were originally evolved and then refined to develop inherent characteristics which humans then exploited for their own benefit. Hunting dogs could, for instance, be used to either find, course or retrieve game or their stalking instincts could be turned to good use as herders. Terriers' propensity to dig could be channelled into finding game or keeping down vermin while large dogs were used as guards or draught animals.

Many families do not own pure bred dogs, however, but have opted for a cross-breed or a mongrel. A cross-breed is the product of a mating between two recognised or "pedigree" breeds. A mongrel's ancestry is much less clear and the dog is most likely to be the product of cross-breed or mongrel parents, sometimes referred to as a "Heinz 57".

Predictably, opinion has varied on the merits of pure breeds as opposed to mongrels. The former are often unscientifically described as being "highly bred" or "in-bred", physically and temperamentally unsound while mongrels are seen as being healthy and fit, the result of hybrid vigour. There is little evidence to support either hypothesis and it is important not to lose sight of the need, in each case, to assess the individual animal's temperament and characteristics, regardless of breed, original function or pedigree.

Canine characteristics

Dogs are fundamentally pack animals. In pack formations, there is always a pack leader, usually a male but not infrequently a female, the "alpha" bitch. Thereafter, there is normally a hierarchy or pecking order and to prevent squabbling or jostling for

position, the owner of two or more dogs needs to identify the pack leader and bolster his or her position. The owner should always be the ultimate "pack leader", of course, with every other human member of the household holding a "pack position" above any of the dogs.

In an increasingly urban society, most people spend less and less time in close proximity to dogs and opportunities to observe canine behaviour and to understand it are restricted. It is essential, nevertheless, that social workers find out something of the owner's perception of their dog, its disposition and behaviour and this is dealt with in greater detail in the section headed *The Dog in the Home* below.

Behaviour associated with dominant animals would include feeding before the others, taking food, toys, bones, etc. from the rest of the pack, pushing others aside to enter doorways first, urinating or "marking" at every opportunity, even in another dog's sleeping area and always getting the most comfortable, often elevated, sleeping spot or the lion's share of attention. The top dog will often approach other dogs in an alert, stiff legged manner with tail raised, attempting to assert superiority and the owner needs to be aware of the tension in such situations. Left to sort things out themselves, however, dogs will normally avoid an actual fight in most circumstances.

Submissive behaviour is characterised by the tail carried between the legs, cringing, rolling the top lip back in a "grin" when challenged by another dog, turning the head to show the back of the neck, rolling onto the back to expose the belly, yawning, licking the lips and generally avoiding confrontation (Serpell, 1995).

At this stage, it is important to heavily underline again the dangers of ascribing characteristics wholesale to particular breeds. It is as misguided (and even dangerous) to assume that all Labradors are friendly, trustworthy dogs as it is to state that all Yorkshire Terriers or Corgis are snappy and that all Rottweilers are savage and unpredictable. The Kennel Club publishes a written Breed Standard for each recognised breed.* These provide not only a physical description of the dog but also a section on "characteristics" and another on "temperament". Certain breeds evolved for guarding and protection or for tackling dangerous game or vermin, may have been required to be "wary of strangers" or to "show dominance over other dogs". Many other breeds,

* *The Kennel Club – Breed Standards*, The Kennel Club, London.

including popular house dogs, are called upon to be “fearless”, “bold”, “determined” or “alert” although it is often frequently stressed that any sign of nervousness or aggression is highly undesirable and untypical of the breed in question. On a more positive note, many breeds are described as being “friendly”, “docile”, “gentle” or even “totally reliable”. Most dogs today, however, are not called upon to work but live purely as pets and companions. Generations of domestication may have diluted many of these original characteristics and regardless of what may be described as the general disposition in a breed, it is imperative that a full understanding of that individual animal is gained before placing a child and upsetting the household equation.

Dogs and the law

There is a large number of Acts of Parliament relating to dogs. Two major pieces of legislation are most likely to affect the dog owner: the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999 and the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (as amended 1997).*

Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999

This Act contains a number of amendments to the Breeding of Dogs Act 1973 which was passed primarily to regulate the activities of commercial breeders who bred on a large scale to supply the pet market, sometimes with scant regard to the welfare of breeding stock and with inadequate facilities to rear and socialise puppies destined for life as a family pet. The main provision of the Act requires anyone breeding five or more litters each year to register as a breeder with the local authority. The council then has a duty to inspect premises and, if satisfied, to licence the establishment. In any household where puppies are regularly bred for pleasure or profit, therefore, it may be appropriate to check whether a licence has been issued. This could perhaps be used to verify that acceptable standards prevail in the care and management of the dogs although a check with the council’s Environmental Health Department to determine the standards to be met for registration may be advisable since these can vary between councils.

Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (as amended 1997)

This Act has already attracted adverse comments from the Bench as it has proved difficult to implement and

enforce. Primarily, the Act was aimed at “dogs belonging to types bred for fighting” and calls for the registration of all dogs designated as “dangerous”. In essence, the breed specified is the Japanese Tosa, a large dog, originally bred as a guard and for fighting. No examples of this breed are known to reside in Great Britain. The other specified “breed” is the pit bull terrier which is not recognised as a breed at all by the Kennel Club and which is really a “type” rather than an actual breed which breeds true. Dogs registered under proceedings instigated by the Act have been thought to have had such breeds as the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Bull Terrier, Dobermann, Rottweiler, Bullmastiff and Rhodesian Ridgeback among others in their antecedents. Determining whether an animal is a pit bull terrier, therefore, has proved difficult and has resulted in several protracted and expensive court cases.

Once registered under the Act, a procedure which only a court may order, a dog may not appear in a public place unless wearing a muzzle and held on a lead by someone over the age of 16 years. Failure to do so results in a fine or possibly even imprisonment for the owner and destruction of the dog. Councils and other agencies do need to consider carefully, therefore, probably in conjunction with their legal adviser, the policy to be invoked when carers become owners of a dog registered under this legislation.

It is very important to note, however, that all dog owners are required to keep their animals under control in public. Having any dog “dangerously out of control” could result in prosecution and, if there is a finding of guilt, a criminal record.

The dog in the home

It is not the intention of this Practice Note to provide guidance on carrying out in-depth assessments of dogs. It will be useful for social workers to obtain information on certain key areas, however, not simply when carrying out assessments of prospective carers but also to assist in making placements of children and subsequently monitoring them. If more detailed evaluation of a dog is deemed necessary, agencies may need to consider approaching other organisations, for example, the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors, for further help.**

* These pieces of legislation do not extend to Northern Ireland where separate, similar provision exists.

** Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors, P.O. Box 46, Worcester WR8 9YS www.apbc.org.uk

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- Confirm what breed the dog is. If the dog is not pure bred, ask if anything is known of the animal's ancestry. Many dogs are wrongly identified as breeds to which they have only a passing resemblance.
 - Establish if the dog was acquired from a reputable breeder, from commercial kennels selling many breeds, a pet shop, a rescue centre or some other source. Most responsible breeders will know the characteristics and histories of their stock, will have used breed-specific health screening schemes to check for hereditary conditions, and will have provided guidance on rearing and training the dog from puppyhood. Larger operations may not have such detailed information and puppies, in some instances, may not even have been bred on the premises.
 - Older dogs acquired from rescue centres often have a history of neglect, ill treatment or abandonment. They may have established behaviour patterns as a result and careful consideration will have to be given to how the family proposes to deal with a child who may have an insecure pattern of attachment and a dog dealing with similar issues!
 - Find out how long the dog has lived with the family and whether, in fact, this is its first home. Dogs with persistent difficulties are often rehomed more than once. A recently acquired dog may not yet have begun to show the problems which resulted in re-homing in the past.
 - Find out who is mainly responsible for looking after the dog. It is important that the two legged "pack leader" is identified and that she/he maintains the dog's routine as far as possible in the midst of the change a new child will inevitably bring.
 - Determine the feeding arrangements for the dog. Is dog food kept out of reach of a child? Are dog utensils and human utensils kept separately? Is the dog allowed to beg when the humans are eating? Although the risk of infection from dogs is minimal, sensible hygiene procedures should be in place at all times, particularly if a crawling infant or toddler is being placed.
 - Be clear about where the dog sleeps. Dogs need a special, safe place where they can be left in peace. Allowing a dog to sleep at the end of a child's bed or even in the child's room may be inadvisable for reasons of both hygiene and safety.
 - Check on exercise and "toileting" routines. Does the dog receive enough exercise to prevent boredom and perhaps resultant destructive behaviour? Where is the dog permitted to relieve itself? What are the "cleaning up" arrangements?
 - Obtain some information on health care. Is the dog vaccinated and wormed regularly? In extremely rare cases, children can sustain eye damage if they are in direct contact with dog faeces containing the eggs of the *toxocara canis* worm. Regular worming eliminates this risk entirely. Coat care should also be a regular feature of the dog's management and routine preventative treatment against fleas and lice is advisable.
 - Observe how the dog behaves when you visit. Is it overly defensive, nervous, aggressive or excessively friendly and demanding of attention? Does it respond to the owner's commands? How does the owner describe the dog's temperament, its behaviour to other visitors, children, other dogs?
 - Clarify the dog's age. An elderly animal may be less able to cope with young children or may be less amenable given the aches and pains of ageing. A young dog may still be unruly and boisterous and any child joining the family will have to be prepared for this.
 - Explore how the family will cope if, after placement, the combination of dogs and children proves untenable. Having to rehome a loved family pet can be upsetting for everyone including the incoming child who may already have sustained significant losses.
 - A number of foster carers and adopters earn their livings from dogs as kennel owners, breeders, dog handlers or proprietors of a grooming business. Others need dogs to help them work, for example, farmers, shepherds, police, gamekeepers and carers who use a guide dog or hearing dog for the deaf. In such cases, it is vital that the possible impact of a new child or children is closely examined.
- Further information on these issues may be obtainable from referees who will often have visited the applicant's home, perhaps even with their own
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children and who may prove to be a valuable source of objective comment.

Introducing the child to the home

Permanent placements

As stated earlier, the family dog needs to be carefully considered as part of the social work assessment of any potential substitute family. At some point in the home study, the social worker will have explored, with the family, the possible impact of an incoming child on the individuals in the family unit and their daily life and routines. Detailed examination of the dog's regime needs to take place as well and any necessary alterations should be implemented before the child arrives. Moving the dog's sleeping quarters to a quieter part of the house, investing in a travelling crate, which can double as a secure bed or enclosing a "dog-free" area of the garden, for example, are all ways in which greater safety and hygiene can be achieved without ousting the dog from its accustomed position. Another example may be in making specific arrangements for the storage of the dog's toys entirely separate from children's toys and ensuring that the dog has unmistakably canine toys such as nylon bones, etc. rather than teddy bears or soft toys.

Many families prepare family books prior to being introduced to their child. These often include photographs of the house and garden, everyone who lives in the home, the local school, etc. and are a useful tool in introductions, the companion volume to the child's life story book, in fact. The family dog can have a section in such a book, too, perhaps showing where it sleeps, its toys, where it goes for walks and so on. Lots of families have penned letters supposedly from their dogs to children prior to placement, explaining such things as what they like to do, what upsets or frightens them and what they will or will not be able to do with the child when he or she comes to stay. Such letters, or even simply captions over the photographs in a family book, can go a long way towards laying out simple ground rules.

When actually introducing child and dog for the first time, some thought should be given to how and where that is done. If the dog is territorial and barks or guards when strangers visit the home, it may be better for a first meeting to take place outside or on the child's home ground. Rehearsing the meeting with the child in advance may be necessary and some children will need to be taught how to approach a dog. Most dogs like to be approached from the front, offering a hand to sniff and then progressing to

scratching under the dog's chin. Few dogs, especially small dogs, appreciate someone looming over them or trying to pat them on the top of the head at a first meeting. The dog should be on a lead at this point, certainly not on the owner's lap, where the guarding instinct may come to the forefront, and should have room to move away if need be. At all times, an adult should be supervising and this will be essential in the first weeks of the placement as well. Even after child and dog appear to be settled, it is up to the adult, preferably the adult with main responsibility for the dog, to remain vigilant when the dog and the child are together. After an initial "honeymoon", many children in permanent placement can direct more challenging behaviour towards the new family and this can extend to the canine family member as well.

Temporary fostering

Much of the foregoing will also apply in temporary fostering situations. The planned element will frequently be absent, of course, so families offering temporary care need to be helped to give careful thought to the impact of the sudden arrival of frightened, distressed or even angry children on themselves, their own children and the family dog. Most children who require temporary care are already known to social workers, even if the admission itself takes place in emergency circumstances. Any information on the child's attitude to dogs, therefore, needs to be noted and passed on to carers. Clearly, it needs to be established if the child has a history of allergies, is very afraid of dogs, has mistreated animals or his or her culture views dogs in a certain light. All of these issues might rule out a possible placement.

The information passed to the child's social worker on the selected foster home also needs to include basic details on the dog so that some initial preparation of the child can take place before arriving on the doorstep to be greeted by a large, boisterous dog. Once the placement is made, adult vigilance is again required at all times to ensure that both child and dog remain safe. Most dogs in temporary foster homes have learned to cope with new, sometimes demanding children but there is never any room for complacency.

Death of a dog

There is always the possibility that, particularly if placing a young child in a family with a mature dog, the animal will die while the child is still relatively young. Carers obviously need to give this matter

some thought in advance. If an old dog is failing or in pain, decisions may need to be taken about euthanasia. How will this decision be taken? Will the child be involved? Will the vet come to the house or will the dog be taken to the surgery? Afterwards, what is to happen to the body? Will the vet make arrangements for disposal or will the dog come home for burial in the garden? There are now a number of companies which organise pet interments or even cremations and the opportunity for a child to grieve and participate in the rituals of mourning may be very beneficial. Sharing in the family's grief can be an inclusive, unifying experience and can even prove a trigger for exploring past losses to help assist in their assimilation.

Disadvantages and benefits of dogs

Disadvantages

- There are some minor health risks for children associated with dogs. Routine canine health care and sensible hygiene precautions should eliminate all of these.
 - Some children may be allergic to dogs. In such cases, even the most rigorous cleaning regime may not prevent allergic reactions and placement in a dog-owning household may simply be out of the question. It is never worth just making the placement and hoping that the child will become accustomed to the dog's presence and build up resistance. The risk of disruption, for either dog or child, is simply too high. It is worth noting, however, that some breeds, for example, Poodles, with their harsh, tightly curled coats, seem to produce less of an allergic response than others.
 - A child may simply be so afraid of dogs that life with a dog would be impossible.
 - Some disabled children with mobility difficulties may be at risk of injury from a large, active dog with a long, wagging tail or a little dog which gets under their feet.
 - The dog may be at serious risk from the child. Because of earlier, damaging experiences, a child may tease or even hurt a dog which may then retaliate with dire consequences. Any information on a child's previous behaviour with animals must be carefully considered prior to placement in any household with pets.
- Children get bitten by dogs. Adults need to realise that circumstances may combine to produce inappropriate behaviour in the child and an uncharacteristic response in the dog. If a child is simply unaccustomed to dogs, then the animal may find itself constantly on the receiving end of attention, even when it is feeding or needs to sleep and the risk of a biting incident is high. Some degree of supervision by grown-ups is essential at all times. The sensible child exercising the placid, reliable dog on a lead in the park may encounter a loose dog spoiling for a fight.

Advantages

- Dogs provide a real source of companionship and unconditional affection.
- They have been identified as an element in providing a "secure base" for a child, thereby enhancing self-esteem and promoting resilience (Gilligan, 2001).
- Very occasionally, a dog may have accompanied the child through placement or have been accommodated in kennels while plans were made for the child's future. In such cases, placing both dog and child together in a permanent family may do much to ease the transition and contribute to the success of the placement.
- Dogs provide a source of fun and interest. Children can derive great satisfaction from exhibiting their dog at shows, from taking part in sponsored dog walks and other events for charities, from participating in dog training, or even obedience and agility competitions and in simply teaching their dog to "do tricks".
- They offer a child the opportunity to demonstrate care and exercise responsibility which again increases resilience and helps develop a robust self-image.
- The dog can provide a focus for shared events in the new family, simply going for a walk together, visiting the vet or the grooming parlour or just playing games in the garden.
- Many children joining new families may be anxious or afraid to make overtures to the humans in the household. The dog may be a much less threatening proposition and the canine ear a much more inviting receptacle for a child's troubles.

Summary

Many families own dogs. Adopting rigid policies in relation to households which have dogs could exclude many potential substitute families who have much to offer children in need of family placements. There are dangers in making assumptions about specific breeds either in terms of their unreliability or their good temperament. Each dog needs to be assessed as an individual animal and its position in the family acknowledged. If a family owns more than one dog, they have a pack and the leader needs to be identified and supported.

Potentially dogs pose a number of dangers to children and these need to be acknowledged and guarded against. Sensible hygiene arrangements and appropriate adult supervision will eliminate or significantly reduce most risks but there is never

room for complacency. Finally, the childhood of many people has been enriched by the companionship and unreserved love of a dog. Children who have had early experiences of rejection, neglect or abuse, may be able to undertake much emotional repair work in their relationship with a dog.

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Written by Ian Millar, Trainer Consultant, BAAF Scotland, with input from David Levy, Kennel Club Liaison Officer and Mr M J R Stockman MRCVS

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