



DEALING WITH DOG BITES

The NZVA has updated its position statement on dangerous dogs (now called Safe Human Dog Interactions). **Naomi Arnold** examines what makes a dog bite, and how it can be prevented.

WHEN NELSON DOG trainer Vikki Pickering teaches kids how to be safe around dogs, one of the most important things she has to tell them is that no matter how cute they are, a dog isn't a big, warm, soft toy.

"I've seen a lot of kids who have no idea how to interact with a dog other than through cuddling, kissing and snuggling," she says.

When it comes to hugging a dog they've just met, or trying to play with them while they're eating or sleeping, she asks the kids to put themselves in the dog's paws.

"How would you feel if someone did that to you? Dogs are exactly the same."

It's important stuff to get across to kids, because research shows that children under 10 are more likely than any other age group to land in hospital with dog bites. According to a study published in *The New Zealand Medical Journal* in May last year, nearly 5,000 people needed hospitalisation due to dog bites in New Zealand between 2004 and 2014 (see sidebar for more details).

The research was compiled by a team of surgeons and emergency department staff, who obtained the data from the Ministry of Health. The report's authors said the true incidence rate of dog bites would be

much higher due to the study's focus, and recommended that dog bite prevention strategies focus on children.

Vikki owns You and Your Dog in Nelson and Tasman, and contracts to Nelson City Council in educating children on how to be safe around dogs. She and her dog Asha teach kids how to read dog body language, what to do if a dog comes up to them ("be a tree"), how to meet a new dog safely and fun things to do with a dog that aren't hugging it or pulling its tail, such as tricks.

She says most of the children who receive bites know the dogs who bit them.

"It's unlikely that random dogs at a park will rush up and bite kids," she says. "They're far more likely to be pets, family dogs at home, nana's dogs or a friend's."

"Even adults, a lot of the time, are unaware of what a dog is comfortable with," she says. "All dogs, just like us, have different personality types and different thresholds for tolerance."

"With dog bite prevention, part of the idea is to prevent dogs being euthanased or ending up in the pound," she says. "A lot of the time [after a bite], people directly take the dog to be put down, not aware of the circumstances leading up to the bite and [that it] could have been prevented."

Whether a dog is dangerous should be based on their actions, not breed, says veterinary behaviourist Jess Beer.



“AS VETERINARIANS WE SHOULD BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS TO KEEP PEOPLE AND ANIMALS SAFE, TO REFLECT THE TRUTH AND MOVE AWAY FROM SCAREMONGERING.”

Research backs this up. In 2016 the NZVA's dog policy, called Dangerous Dogs at the time, was updated to include the most recent evidence about dog bites in an attempt to help combat the myths and falsehoods that linger in the public imagination, such as Pit Bulls being able to 'lock' their jaws when they bite.

“As veterinarians we should be at the forefront of evidence-based recommendations to keep people and animals safe, to reflect the truth and move away from scaremongering,” veterinary behaviourist Jess Beer says.

The position statement's most recent update, at the end of 2019, came with a name change (from Dangerous Dogs to Safe Human Dog Interactions) to reflect the fact that existing processes for classifying dogs as 'menacing' or 'dangerous' did not adequately support successful dog control in New Zealand. More important was responsible dog ownership and education.

“We are really trying to redirect the conversation away from just the behaviour of the dog and turn the focus towards owner and human behaviour,” NZVA Veterinary Manager (Small Animal) Lorelle Barrett says.

“It's about what do we need to do to focus ownership and responsibility onto the human part of the relationship? Dangerous dogs aren't just magically born.”

So how do dog bites happen? And how can they be prevented?

For a start, it's important to consider what makes a dog 'menacing' and 'dangerous', and that's where the age-old nature vs. nurture debate comes in.

Jess, whose company Kiwi Vet Behaviour addresses behaviour problems in companion animals, was one of the veterinary behaviourists consulted by the Companion Animal Veterinarians committee responsible for the position statement update. She says that when it comes to determining what a 'dangerous' or 'menacing' dog is, “it's very much whatever the law decides”. Currently, the Department of Internal Affairs bans five breeds from being imported into New Zealand: American Pit Bull Terrier, Dogo

Canine behaviourist Vikki Pickering gets people to see their behaviour from a dog's perspective.



Argentino, Brazilian Fila, Japanese Tosa and Perro de Presa Canario.

It says the classification of a 'menacing dog' includes "any characteristics typically associated with the dog's breed or type".

"In my opinion we need to be separating whether a dog has done something that justifies it being labelled in that manner," Jess says.

"We strongly disagree with [it] because it's not applicable to every dog. That's where the use of language should be based on a dog's actions rather than someone else's presumption."

Pit Bulls, for example, are often thought of as the default menacing dog.

"That's not necessarily true. We need to emphasise the risks that contribute to a dog bite. I don't think there's an exact answer to it, but we should say a dangerous dog is one who has acted in a manner that has indicated they are a danger rather than menacing as a breed alone, which is our biggest downfall."

Despite evidence suggesting otherwise, breed-specific presumptions

THE FACTS ON DOG BITES IN NEW ZEALAND (2004–14)

- Most dog bite injuries requiring hospitalisation occurred in summer.
- Māori had a higher incidence and significantly greater relative risk of dog bites, with patients of Asian descent having the lowest.
- Males were at more risk than females.
- Children under 10 were the most vulnerable group.
- Most bites in children under 14 were on the head or neck.
- Most bites happened in homes or other private residences.
- Areas of high socioeconomic deprivation had a significantly greater incidence of bites than areas with the lowest deprivation score.

REFERENCE:

Mair J, Duncan-Sutherland N, Moaveni Z. The incidence and risk factors of dog bite injuries requiring hospitalisation in New Zealand. *The New Zealand Medical Journal* 132, 1494, 3 May 2018



Vikki shows children how to read a dog's expressions.

and subsequent legislation are very common. Internationally, different states and countries have passed laws that control dog ownership based on animal breeds. They are mistaken, according to a raft of professional bodies. The American Veterinary Medical Association (2020) is opposed to breed-specific legislation and says it's not the answer for preventing dog bites.

"Any dog can bite, regardless of its breed," its position statement says. "It is the dog's individual history, behavior, general size, number of dogs involved, and the vulnerability of the person bitten that determines the likelihood of biting and whether a dog will cause a serious bite injury. Breed-specific bans are a simplistic answer to a far more complex social problem, and they have the potential to divert attention and resources from more effective approaches."

The US-based Association of Professional Dog Trainers, the Pet Professional Guild and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) hold similar positions, and emphasise the importance of puppy socialisation from four weeks to four months of life, before those first puppy vaccination courses are complete (see 'Further reading'). The AVSAB points out that in fact behavioural issues, not infectious diseases, are the number-one cause of death for dogs under three years of age.

"It has been proven that breed-specific legislation doesn't have any impact on the number of dog bites," Jess says. "It's often

poor breeding, socialisation, management and breeding techniques – it's not as simple as the breed causing it."

Unfortunately, the veterinary industry is not often involved in these dogs' care, Jess says. And she says there are very few dog bite statistics. "Although they may be recorded by ACC, we have no idea about the breeds and circumstances, so without that information [the attitude that a menacing dog is a Pit Bull] is not applicable – it neglects to address the issues that cause the bites."

Although she's not sure what role veterinarians can have in explaining this big and complex issue to clients in detail, Jess says they can help prevent dog bites by giving out the right advice to new puppy owners. They can also have a hand in helping to educate clients about responsible breeding.

"Puppy farms and unregistered, irresponsible breeders are producing dogs who are poorly socialised and have poor genetics, so they are anxious and biting," Jess says. They are responsible for the biggest production of dogs who go on to be dangerous – or are euthanased before they get the chance to be.

"Responsible breeding is something we should be passionate about. When choosing a puppy, we should be choosing from a registered breeder. Then there are areas of New Zealand where people can't afford to de-sex or don't want to, and they pass on the puppies to family members unsocialised and not de-sexed and they bite the grandkids. They are the most common biting presentations."

The NZVA position statement addresses this too, stating that anyone with a dog capable of breeding should be required to have a specific permit, with exemptions for owners who are already part of a breeding organisation with a code of ethics. It goes as far as to say that all dog owners should need to get a licence before owning a dog, which would require them to pass a course on responsible dog ownership.

Companion Animals New Zealand (CANZ) is also jumping on board to help owners. It's launching an animal trainer accreditation system in September 2020 to give dog owners confidence when hiring puppy trainers. CANZ is also planning a dog safety educator accreditation scheme.

"At present, dog safety education, along with the animal behaviour and training industry in New Zealand, is unregulated, which creates significant risks for the dogs, boards of trustees, school staff and pupils," says David Lloyd, CANZ's General Manager.

"It's a way to make sure that people are getting the best information and learning the best training techniques, while at the same time protecting dogs from physical and psychological harm," he says. 🐾

FURTHER READING:

American Veterinary Medical Association. Why Breed-specific Legislation Is not the Answer. www.avma.org/resources/pet-owners/why-breed-specific-legislation-not-answer

Association of Professional Dog Trainers. Breed Specific Legislation. <https://apdt.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PositionStatement.BreedSpecificLegislation.pdf>

The Pet Professional Guild. Breed Specific Legislation. www.petprofessionalguild.com/breed-specific-legislation

The Pet Professional Guild. Puppy Socialization Position Statement. www.petprofessionalguild.com/puppysocializationpositionstatement