**Practitioner Advice for Staying Safe Around Dogs**

**Occupation:** All Workers Conducting Home Visits

**Activity:** Advice for Staying Safe Around Dogs

**Version Control:** Version 2 (February 2020)

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**Introduction**

Workers from agencies who have cause to visit residential or other properties will likely come into contact with dogs. Workers are reminded that **all** dogs can behave in an unpredictable manner and care should always be taken when attending any premises where dogs are known or likely to be. Every dog is a unique individual with their own behaviours formed by a multitude of factors including breed, age, individual personality, medical issues and prior experiences. Even if you are comfortable and experienced with dogs never assume that you can predict how a dog will react when you encounter them. In addition, even if you are familiar with a particular dog, events that took place shortly before your visit may affect that dog’s behaviour.

Research shows that most dog bites within occupational contexts take place while entering or leaving a private property or while entering or leaving a room within a house, in many situations the dog owner is present (Owczarczak-Garstecka et al. 2019). A dog might find it challenging when unfamiliar people visit their home environment and could become worried or intimidated in response to someone entering their home. If a dog feels unsafe and is unable to retreat or avoid a situation or interaction, they might behave aggressively as a means of repelling what is concerning them in order to maintain their own safety, with snapping and biting being motivated by fearfulness. Some dogs might have learned from previous experiences that behaving aggressively is helpful and successful, as people then retreat and leave them alone, and might therefore aggress in the same way the next time someone unfamiliar enters the home. Furthermore, many dog owners may not be able to predict how their dog is likely to behave in a particular context and may offer inadvertent reassurance to the visitor (Owczarczak-Garstecka et al. 2019). Bite victims typically believe that a bite would not happen to them (Westgarth & Watkins, 2015), which may contribute to not taking precautions when interacting with dogs.

It would be highly recommended that arrangements for the securing of the dog are made in advance with the householder and if this is not agreed to the worker should consider whether the visit is essential or if the purposes could be achieved in an alternative fashion. In addition, dog owners should be asked not to encourage the visitor to meet or interact with a dog. The policy of avoiding dogs should be explained to the dog owner prior to the visit.

In ideal scenarios therefore, it would be recommended that workers do not enter a home where a dog is present, unless the dog is kept/put separately and securely in another room, in the garden or taken out for a walk by a trusted party e.g. relative, dog walker, during the visit. This would ensure the safety of the staff member without the need for them to try to make their own judgement about the dog’s behaviour, potentially putting themselves, the visited family and dog at risk.

It is however accepted that this is not always possible and indeed that such arrangements may frustrate the reasons for the visit. There are also possible scenarios where a worker was unaware of the presence of a dog on premises prior to the visit and only becomes aware after entering. As such the below advice has been created to try to assist staff in dealing with situations where a dog may be present. The advice is not exhaustive and if in doubt about their safety a worker should leave the premises as safely as possible.

1. Each situation is different and so requires workers to undertake a dynamic risk assessment of, and constantly review, the situation.
2. When visiting a property, it is safest to presume, unless you know otherwise, that a dog may be present and loose in the property. This is true even if you believe that you have the owner’s prior assurance that the dog will be safely secured. You may also be able to determine the presence of a dog by observing the surrounding property for evidence of dog toys, leads, food bowls, excrement etc.
3. Never enter premises and/or garden where a dog is loose.
4. Prior to the visit, it would be beneficial to call the owner reminding them to keep their dog in a separate area. When you knock on a door stand well back, whilst remaining calm and relaxed.
5. **DO NOT** put your hands through a letter box over or through fences/gaps etc. If you need to deliver any post, you should use a posting peg. In addition, it is also suggested workers wear long trousers as dog-related injuries could include scratches and nips which can be protected against.
6. If the worker is on the premises, having been previously unaware of the presence of a dog, and has any concerns for their safety, they should always ask the owner to either leash/secure the dog and or remove it from the room/garden. If the owner refuses, then the worker may wish to leave the premises and/or area and consider alternative options for completing the task and discuss the matter with their manager.
7. Do not accept a dog owner’s assurance that it will not harm you.
8. Be alert for signs that indicate a dog may be worried or uncomfortable. These include **ears back, licking its lips, cowering, yawning, moving away, avoiding contact, snarling or growling.** [**RSPCA Understanding Dog Behaviour**](https://www.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494939/7712578/Understanding+Dog+Behaviour+%28PDF%3A+525KB%29.pdf/fc5c2c3a-7790-e6e5-c1aa-37b6795c9319?version=2.0&t=1559144852394&download=true)**.**
9. Never over-estimate a dog’s tolerance. Every dog has its limits and if it feels worried, scared or hurt may use aggressive behaviour.
10. Try to remain calm, quiet and relaxed around any dog, keeping your tone neutral and calm.
11. If a dog approaches in a friendly way, stand still so that the dog can sniff you. Do not hold out your hand either open palm or closed palm, keep your arms by your side. There should be no need to stroke or physically interact with a dog. [How to Greet a Dog](https://drsophiayin.com/app/uploads/2017/08/How-to-Greet-a-Dog-Poster.pdf)
12. Do not bring any treats with you on your visit. Treats may tempt a nervous dog outside of the space where they feel comfortable, inadvertently putting pressure on a dog. In addition, a dog may soon get used to approaching visitors, and another visitor may not be aware of it and could be in a situation where a dog is approaching and expecting treats, when they don’t have any.
13. It would be beneficial to know where the dog is settled whilst conducting your visit. If you become worried at any point, stay still, calm and quiet and ask the owner to remove them. If necessary, you can suggest distracting them using a toy or treat, before slowly and calmly making your exit without having to approach the dog. When leaving the property, even if a dog was friendly during the visit, ask the owner to remove the dog as they may behave differently in the corridor/front door.
14. If a dog jumps up at you, cross your arms, turn and look away. If you get knocked over, curl up in a ball and cover your head with your arms until the dog is removed. If a dog does attack, and you have a bag or coat you can use this to redirect the dog onto this and away from your body.
15. **DO NOT** hurry away – this may trigger the chase instinct, walk away calmly.
16. **DO NOT** glare at the dog, shout, make sudden movements or kick out – these actions may frighten a dog and they may behave aggressively in response.
17. When out in the community it is safer to assume that any dog would prefer to be left alone and be cautious with it.
18. If a person is threatening and or using their dog as a means of intimidation, then leave the premises/area and report the matter to your manager and the Police.
19. Report all bites or near misses to your manager and the Police to make risk visible to others visiting the premises in the future.
20. Keep an organisational record of all dogs on visited properties and regularly update this.

See also: [RSPCA - what to do when you meet an unfamiliar dog](https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/company/unfamiliar)