

Dangerous Dog Policy Recommendations

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Introduction

The topic of dangerous dogs is a particularly challenging one. While most people agree that truly dangerous dogs should be humanely euthanized, there is often disagreement about which dogs are truly dangerous; whether or not some dangerous dogs can be rehabilitated; or what steps shelters should implement in order to prevent dangerous dogs from leaving the shelter and ending up in the public.

All of that is made more complicated by the fact that there is no 100% perfect method for assessing dog behavior, or predicting future dog behavior in different or new situations. Additionally, many techniques employed by most animal shelters have been described as arbitrary or “no better than a coin toss” by credentialed veterinary behaviorists who have evaluated these practices.

All of this is complicated further by the fact that dogs are natural predators, with teeth designed for aggressive biting. At the same time, natural canine behavior often involves a dog using its teeth in non-aggressive ways. Mouthing or play biting is a good example. Defensive “warning” snaps (that generally result in little or no injury to the target) are another. The latter, is one of a dog’s few ways of communicating that what is currently happening scares them and asking a person to please stop doing what they are doing.

There are also forms of false aggression, or aggression displays that are not true aggression. Barrier aggression, for example is a normal display behavior for most dogs when they are separated from a stranger by a fence, gate or other barrier. It can include barking, growling, lip curling and, especially in larger breed dogs, can appear very dangerous, even if the dog

displaying this behavior has no plan to follow through with a bite should the barrier be removed. Barrier aggression is one of the reasons so many sweet dogs bark so savagely at the mail carrier.

Barrier aggression is quite common. And, animal shelters have barriers everywhere. There are also other environmental factors that escalate dog behavior in other ways. Oftentimes, a dog’s behavior in the shelter is quite different than their behavior in a home environment.

Not only can all of this cause shelters to label harmless dogs as dangerous, they can also fail to identify dogs that are actually dangerous. The unusual environment at a shelter can cause some dogs that are not aggressive to be hyper-defensive and appear aggressive when they are not. It can also cause dogs that are truly aggressive to “shut down” and not act out, until they are in a more comfortable situation, like a home, where they feel they have more “control,” or freedom to attempt to dominate.

Many volumes could be written about the different and complex behaviors of dogs in animal shelters. Accomplishing that, naturally, is far beyond the scope of this document. The goal of this writing is to help you determine what needs to be in place to help identify dangerous dogs.

Background

Traditionally, the most common approach to trying to identify dangerous dogs has been the implementation of a so-called temperament test. I call them so-called temperament tests because they do not and cannot assess temperament at all. They do attempt to identify behavior. They do this by putting

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dogs through a series of fairly contrived situations that have little resemblance to real life.

For example, in one of the most commonly conducted tests, a large plastic doll is stomped around on the ground in front of a dog to try to determine the dog's compatibility with children, as if dogs are incapable of distinguishing a hard, plastic structure from an actual child. If the dog barks curiously at the doll, the dog could fail the test. If the dog ignores the doll, he or she could be labeled as disinterested in children. While that might sound arbitrary and subjective to people unfamiliar with temperament tests, it seems even more so observing a test being performed. The development of these tests date back many years or decades for all of the commonly used tests.

Back when the Assess-A-Pet test was developed, for example, it was commonly believed, incorrectly, that due to severe pet overpopulation, at least 50% of dogs that enter animal shelters needed to be destroyed. The developer of that test (who, I should note, is not a behaviorist) has been quoted as saying that she believed that 50% number was about right. She, in effect, developed her test to help shelters achieve the goal of deciding which half of the dogs they were going to destroy. She has said that her own pet dogs would not pass her test.

All of that likely accounts for the extreme inaccuracies found when these tests are tested.

Jessica Heckman, DVM, MS is a prominent behaviorist who has studied and tested these tests of shelter dogs. In concluding her study, she wrote:

“These are pretty chilling results. They could be

interpreted to mean that the two most widely used behavioral assessments in the United States are not doing even a passable job of predicting aggression, and that shelters are not doing much more than flipping a coin when they use an assessment to decide whether a dog will be put on the adoption floor or, potentially, euthanized.”

Coming to realize that shelters don't have to kill many of the dogs they take in and that the tests they have been using are grossly ineffective at detecting dogs that are actually aggressive, while also falsely labeling innocent dogs as aggressive, some of the most progressive shelters are trying different things. The recommendations that follow encompass practices from some of the most successful of those shelters.

Dangerous Dogs

Not all dogs that bite are dangerous. As mentioned earlier, there are many reasons dogs naturally use their teeth, including to communicate or play with people or other animals. A dog that defends itself using his or her teeth is also not exhibiting aggressive behavior. This is why veterinarians and groomers routinely keep muzzles handy for doing simple things like nail trims, vaccinations and blood draws. Dogs that have had painful experiences with these procedures in the past are particularly prone to being fearful when these procedures are performed. Snapping, growling or lip curling are perfectly natural behaviors for dogs that fear they are being injured or harmed. People who perform procedures that dogs are likely to perceive this way should be trained to manage these behaviors, de-

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escalate the fear when possible, and to gently use protective equipment like muzzles to keep themselves from being bitten. As most any groomer can tell you, this can include any time you require a dog to do something that causes fear in the dog, up to and including simple things like giving them baths.

It should be stated that defensive snapping usually results in little or no significant damage. It usually presents as a quick snap and an immediate release. The behavior also usually always stops as soon as the threat to the dog is removed. Dogs that bite, therefore, in these situations, are not dangerous dogs. They may require special handling. They are not, however, dangerous.

Bite Inhibition and Bite Restraint and What They Say About Dangerous Dogs

The number of dogs living in US households has been climbing for years and reached 83.3 million in 2014. The agency that tracks dog bite statistics in the USA is the Center for Disease Control (CDC). According to them, an estimated 4.7 million dog bites occur annually, with the overwhelming majority (93%) requiring no medical attention whatsoever (See Attachment). About 333,000 (7%) require some medical attention, 6,000 (0.01%) require hospitalization and 30 (0.000638%) result in fatalities.

To put those numbers in perspective, there are an average of 33,000 human fatalities related to automobile accidents annually.

As part of their dog bite prevention work, the CDC also states that victim behavior is one of the primary causes of dog bites. It is clear, therefore, that the vast, overwhelming majority of dogs are not

dangerous and are safe to adopt into new homes.

The reason there are few serious dog bites relative to the number of dogs in the USA is due to various characteristics of canine behavior, two particularly: Bite inhibition and bite restraint.

Bite inhibition is a characteristic that causes a dog to resist biting until it is pushed beyond its biting threshold. A dog with a lot of bite inhibition is less likely to bite than a dog with a lower level of it.

Bite restraint is the measure of a dog's ability and willingness to limit the strength of their bite when they do bite.

Nearly all dogs have some degree of both bite inhibition and bite restraint that are developed at a very early age. Most behaviorists agree that a dog has developed nearly all of the bite restraint and bite inhibition that it is going to develop by the time they are about five months old. A dog that is showing clear signs that it is lacking in both bite inhibition and bite restraint and that is of a size where it can do serious damage to people or other dogs is a dangerous dog. Such dogs are willing to use their teeth offensively, rather than just defensively, and they are willing to use their teeth to cause real damage. Dogs in this category are unsafe to place in the public, are not mentally healthy, and, according to credentialed behaviorists, have a grave prognosis for rehabilitation, especially if they are more than 4 months of age. They should be humanely euthanized.

It is important to understand, however, that a dog in a shelter may not have expressed their lack of these characteristics (by not biting) may still lack bite restraint and/or bite inhibition, because, as stated earlier, the shelter environment can enhance or suppress

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different behaviors in different dogs. A comprehensive dog handling and management protocol for staff and volunteers should be in place that includes a behavior program that can help identify animals exhibiting key behavior markers before incidents happen with dogs.

It is also worth noting that the stereotypical expectation most people have when they think in terms of dangerous dog behavior is generally not how truly dangerous dogs behave most of the time. Some of the most dangerous dogs I have met appeared sweet and friendly most of the time, and very, very badly some of the time or in very specific situations. And, it is almost certain that you will not be 100% accurate in identifying dangerous dogs. The recommendations here are offered to help you get as close as you likely can.

Volunteers with Dangerous Dogs

One of the most challenging aspects of managing dogs in the shelter, where there is always the possibility that dangerous dogs will be present and may be present but not yet identified, is the fact that shelters also rely on volunteers to help walk, socialize and train the dogs. A comprehensive dog management/handling protocol can dramatically reduce the safety risks that situation obviously presents. It should also account for other important aspects of the shelter/volunteer relationship.

The volunteers are being asked to pour their hearts into the dogs at the shelter to help them find new homes. And animal shelter volunteers everywhere do that. When a dog with which they have been working ends up being classified as dangerous, they will understandably go through a grieving process. A

mistake many shelters make is not preparing for that, or the form the grieving may take.

Ultimately, it is the volunteers at the shelter who see the dogs in the greatest variety of contexts and situations. They often know the dogs as well or better than some of the staff. Ensuring lines of communication between staff and volunteers remain open, therefore, is an important part of being able to identify dangerous dogs. It is essential that volunteers feel safe reporting dog behavior accurately. They should never be made to feel responsible for dogs being euthanized when behavior concerns are reported. They should have confidence the behavior/management protocol uses such reports to help improve the behavior of the dogs, and make them more adoptable. Otherwise, they will be less inclined to report incidents with dogs, and the shelter may have a more difficult time identifying dangerous dogs.

Dangerous Dogs and Breed Bias

Much misinformation has been spread about dogs commonly referred to as “pit bulls,” including myths about the bite strength of the dogs and more. Before going further, it should be pointed out that the term “pit bull” does not really represent a breed of dog. It is generally a derogatory term used to refer to a collection of different breeds of dogs, including Staffordshire Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers and Bull Terriers, as the breeds are known by the American Kennel Club (AKC). Some people include American Bulldogs and several other breeds. In some contexts, the term is used to refer to any strong dog with a blocky head. It should be noted that the United Kennel Club recognizes a breed called the American Pit Bull Terrier, which many people

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believe to be the same as the American Staffordshire Terrier breed of the AKC. However, when people refer to “pit bulls” they are usually not only referring to that one UKC breed. They are almost always talking about a broad collection of different breeds that no one has ever really sat down and defined to any level of general agreement.

This makes the urban legends and myths about dogs that fit this description particularly damaging to dogs. They also needlessly complicate the life of shelter staff whose job it is to teach responsible dog bite prevention. Every time they need to spend time educating someone that pit bulls do not really have greater biting strength than other large breeds, or that they are not more prone to biting than other breeds, they are using up time they could otherwise be using to teach people about how they can prevent dogs from biting.

In some communities, the myths and urban legends about pit bulls have taken hold to the point where some communities have passed bans on ownership of certain breeds of dogs. These bans have proven ineffective at reducing the number of serious dog bites. The bans also cause serious harm to families and dogs in the communities where they have been enacted. They also often result in expenses in needless litigation which often results, because the bans have been widely held by courts to be unconstitutional, because they violate the “Void for Vagueness” doctrine of the US constitutional law, because it has been demonstrated in court that animal shelters and animal control staff in general, even well-trained ones, have a poor ability to identify the breeds often included in the bans, especially when looking at mixed breed dogs.

It has been shown, for example, that the offspring of a Boxer and a Labrador

retriever can look exactly like several of the breeds that might be included in a breed ban.

For all of these reasons, local dangerous dog ordinances and shelter management practices should not include breed-specific criteria. Each dog of each breed is an individual and should be treated and evaluated individually.

When Dogs Do Bite

When animals do bite, and the bite breaks skin, even if it is a minor bite, a formal procedure needs to be in place that includes mandatory incident reporting, quarantining of the animal(s) involved in the incident, evaluation of the incident, including, but not limited to, the following criteria:

- Was the bite motivated by fear or in any way provoked by the victim (whether intentionally or not)?
- The severity of the damage caused by the bite.
- Number of bites. Some incidents can include multiple bites and each bite should be assessed.
- Type of bite.
 - Snap and release?
 - Grab and hold?
- Any factors that may have contributed to causing the bite, or exacerbating it.
- Witnesses to the incident.
- Ensure any medical care needed is provided.

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A Note About Cat Bites

While many animal shelters often treat cat bite incidents as though they are less significant or serious than dog bites, in part because the physical damage done seems much less, cat bites can be very serious. Cats' mouths contain bacteria that are far more likely to cause serious infections than the bites of many other animals. Relatively minor-looking cat bites can lead to required hospitalization and should be taken seriously when they occur and puncture the skin in any meaningful way.

Recommendations

- Enact laws that prohibit the long-term chaining of dogs outside.
- Review any existing response protocols that are in place in the event of a dangerous dog incident at the shelter. If there is no formal protocol, develop one.
- Review any existing animal handling/management protocols and update and expand them as needed, ensuring they include a behavior program to help correct behavior problems in the shelter and to help identify potentially dangerous dogs.
- Develop a formal policy statement, if there is not one in place already, that indicates all dogs at the shelter that meet the legal definition of Dangerous, according to State law, will be euthanized, following any legally mandated holding period. Also indicate that dogs determined to be dangerous by the Shelter Behavior Program shall be euthanized, following the expiration of all legally required hold periods.
- Ensure the behavior program outlined in the animal handling/management protocols includes daily outdoor, off-leash canine playgroup sessions. The kind of activity and exercise provided in these sessions is therapeutic to the shelter dogs. This, therefore, reduces negative behavior in the shelter. It also provides a more natural and complex environment in which to observe dog behavior. These play groups provide observers with the most complete picture of each dog's behavior.
- Developing a playgroup program should be done with the help of a behavior expert, with experience implementing such programs.
- Ensure all of the dangerous dog policies and handling protocols are breed-neutral.
- Ensure the Animal handling/management protocol includes mandatory incident reporting, and a formal process for doing so, whenever anyone is bitten by any animal at the shelter, and that following all applicable laws (like mandatory rabies quarantine) are included in that protocol.
- Develop a Standard Operating Procedure or Protocol to follow when animal bites occur at the shelter.

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Attachment

Annual Dog Bites in the USA in Perspective

Source: CDC

