

PPA1 Prevention of dog bite incidents involving humans

(adopted 23/02/2025)

NOTE: Reference to 'the RSPCA' or 'RSPCA' in this document includes RSPCA Australia and each of its member Societies.

RSPCA policies reflect the best available evidence to direct and guide RSPCA and others, to promote and achieve good animal welfare outcomes.

1 Introduction

1.1 This position paper must be read in conjunction with the following RSPCA policies and position paper:

- Policy A2 Responsible companion animal ownership
- Policy A6 Breeding and rearing of companion animals
- Policy A7 Companion animal management
- Policy A8 Housing of companion animals
- Position paper A5 Responsible companion animal breeding
- Policy GP1 Good animal welfare

1.2 The RSPCA's policy on managing dog bite incidents in the community is as follows:

Policy A 7.11.4

Managing dog bites in the community

The RSPCA recognises that dogs are individuals. A dog of any size, sex, breed, or mix of breeds may pose a risk to people and other animals. Therefore, dogs should not be declared dangerous on the basis of breed or appearance. Rather, a dog should be individually assessed based on their behaviour by a veterinarian or suitably qualified dog behaviourist.

The RSPCA opposes dog management legislation that discriminates against specific types or breeds of dogs.

The RSPCA advocates that a prevention and response strategy for dog bite (or near-miss) incidents must include the following key elements:

- Human factors – Consideration and guidance as to how people can live safely with dogs (e.g. education about dog behaviour and interacting safely with dogs, selecting dogs for behavioural traits compatible with being a companion, and responsible ownership behaviours including ensuring companion dogs have their needs met).
- Dog factors – Consideration and guidance to reduce the risk of dog bites and associated behaviour (e.g. appropriate selection of an individual dog, appropriate socialisation to a range of people, places, and other animals, adequate control of dogs, seeking and implementing the advice of a veterinarian or suitably qualified dog behaviourist if there are early signs of concerning behaviour).
- Regulatory factors – Consistent and clear guidance about managing dogs to mitigate future risk once a near miss (i.e. menacing or rushing) or bite incident has occurred (e.g. registration and microchipping, consistent protocols in response to public reports, public awareness campaigns).

People who are managing and enforcing dog control provisions should receive training in safe and humane handling of dogs. Humane techniques and minimal force should be used to safely control dogs.

1.3 The RSPCA is committed to a comprehensive evidence-based preventative approach to dog bite incidents that prioritises both the safety of humans and animals and the welfare of dogs.

- 1.4 Many people in Australia share their daily lives with at least one dog. Dogs can provide many benefits to people through their companionship and assistance but there are inherent risks associated with interacting with dogs, including the potential for dog bites and other hazardous behaviours (e.g. rushing¹, menacing²), and other risks such as trip hazards and zoonotic disease. The risks can be reduced but some risk will always remain.
- 1.5 This paper is focused on prevention of dog bite incidents involving people; however, people should also take steps to minimise other risks associated with interacting with dogs, including trip hazards and zoonotic disease. In addition, where dog bite incidents involving other dogs or animals (or other hazardous behaviours directed at another dog or animal) occur, the advice of a veterinarian with expertise in dog behaviour or a suitably qualified dog behaviourist should be promptly sought, and effective action taken to mitigate future risk. Methods must be humane, and should be low-stress, force-free, reward-based, and prioritise positive reinforcement. Aversive equipment and methods must not be used. See [Policy 7.7](#) for more detail.
- 1.6 Effective strategies implemented by individuals (dog owners and those who interact with dogs), organisations, businesses, and government are needed to reduce the risk of dog bite incidents as these can result in physical injury and psychological trauma for people and animals and sometimes even be fatal.
- 1.7 Any dog may bite; a dog's actions are the result of many factors such as their individual experiences, age, training, genetics, personality, health, and environmental influences (including the owner/handler's knowledge, behaviour, actions, and influences, and the dog being put in situations likely to elicit aggressive behaviour). Most dog biting behaviour is fear-based, in response to pain, or due to a perceived threat to the dog's safety or to possession of a resource.
- 1.8 Acknowledging each dog as a unique and sentient being allows us to understand the factors influencing their individual behaviour at any given moment. This understanding can inform behavioural management to encourage positive interactions and collective safety.
- 1.9 *Breed-specific legislation*
- 1.9.1 The RSPCA opposes breed-specific legislation because:
- Dog breed is a poor predictor of biting behaviour.
 - Breed components of mixed breed dogs cannot be reliably identified by visual or DNA assessment.
 - International and national evidence demonstrates that breed-specific legislation fails to effectively prevent or reduce dog bite incidents or make living with dogs safer.
- 1.9.2 There is a need for evidence-based approaches that embrace education, responsible breeding and ownership, and legislative tools that promote safety while safeguarding dog welfare, rather than breed-specific legislation.

2 Prevention

- 2.1 Prevention strategies are critical to a safer coexistence with dogs, including strategies aimed at making human-dog interactions safer and managing the environment to reduce the risk of unsafe interactions with dogs.

¹ 'Rushing' or to 'rush at' means that the dog has approached a person within three metres, displaying aggressive behaviour such as snarling, growling, barking, or raising the hackles.

² 'Menacing' behaviour includes the dog causing a non-serious bite injury to a person or animal, or if the dog rushes at or chases a person.

- 2.2 Human and animal welfare and health are interconnected. Therefore, a one-welfare³/one-health⁴ approach is important in both preventing injuries and trauma and supporting a proactive culture that prioritises understanding and empathy.
- 2.3 *Strategies for owners to prevent dog bite incidents*
- 2.3.1 Within Australia, dog owners are responsible for managing their dog in a way that keeps the community safe.
- 2.3.2 Living safely with dogs depends upon people choosing dogs who are compatible with the life they are expected to lead, meeting the physical and mental needs⁵ of their dogs, and interacting with and managing dogs safely.
- 2.3.3 Prospective owners should source puppies and dogs from reputable organisations or breeders. All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that the puppy or dog is likely to have behaviour compatible with the prospective owners' lifestyle and family (human and animal) and that they can meet the dog's physical and mental needs.
- 2.3.4 Dog owners should prevent unwanted or unsupervised interactions with their dogs by:
- keeping the dog under effective control⁶ when in public places
 - asking people (including those with other dogs on leash) not to approach their dog without consent
 - ensuring control of dogs in off leash areas such as dog parks and dog beaches (and avoiding these locations if they do not have effective control of their dog when off leash)
 - keeping dogs securely contained on private property
 - carefully supervising their dogs' interactions with people and other animals.
- 2.3.5 Prospective and current dog owners should make efforts to understand dog behaviour and learn the warning signs that dogs provide during dog-human interactions. People need to be able to recognise body language and other signals which warn them that the dog may be feeling protective emotions (e.g. anxiety, discomfort, fear) and they should move away and give the dog space. These protective emotions can lead to a behavioural response that includes biting, especially if the warning signs are ignored or misinterpreted and if people consequently respond in a way that puts them at risk (e.g. moving towards a fearful dog).
- 2.3.6 Teaching children to understand dog body language and how to interact appropriately and safely with dogs (including familiar and unfamiliar dogs) is important. Direct supervision of children and dog interactions by a responsible adult is necessary and, where not possible, dogs and children should be physically separated by a secure barrier.
- 2.3.7 Owners should inform people how their dog prefers to be interacted with or if the people should avoid the dog. People should be reminded to be mindful of the dog's own space and not to approach a dog who is resting, asleep, or eating. Owners should note their dog's response to visitors and create a physical barrier (e.g. door or gate) between the dog and visitors if the dog appears uncomfortable or unsure.

³ 'One Welfare' is the concept that animal welfare is interconnected with human welfare and environmental sustainability, with each depending on and influencing the others.

⁴ 'One Health' is the concept that animal and human health are interdependent and dependent on the health of the environment in which they exist.

⁵ An animal's physical and mental needs are what the animal requires to have good physical and mental wellbeing (including positive feelings and experiences). This includes good nutrition (food and water), a safe and comfortable environment, optimal health, and the opportunity to choose how they behave and interact with others and the environment and how they spend their time. All of these factors impact how they experience the world, their feelings, and their mental state.

⁶ Under 'effective control' means: keeping your dog on a leash no longer than two metres or keeping your dog in sight and responsive to your commands.

- 2.3.8 Owners should provide their dog with a safe, comfortable space in the home environment to which the dog can retreat and be left alone. This allows the dog to choose whether or not to interact with people or other animals.
- 2.3.9 To promote positive welfare and compatibility with life as a dog living alongside humans (including helping to reduce future risk of biting), it is important that puppies are:
 - provided with a caring early life in a healthy and positive environment that meets their physical and mental needs
 - not weaned/separated from their mother and littermates too early
 - socialised in an encouraging way to a range of people, objects, experiences, noises, and places (especially during their early months)
 - only trained using positive (reward-based) methods.
- 2.3.10 Where puppies/dogs show concerning behaviours or early indications that they may pose a risk of biting, such as those indicative of fear or anxiety that can lead to a bite if left untreated, owners should promptly seek support from a veterinarian with expertise in dog behaviour or a suitably qualified dog behaviourist and take effective action to mitigate the risk. Methods must be humane, and should be low-stress, force-free, reward-based, and prioritise positive reinforcement. Aversive equipment and methods must not be used. See [Policy 7.7](#) for more detail.
- 2.3.11 Dogs with signs of concerning behavioural issues (e.g. significant fear and anxiety and/or a bite history) should not be bred from due to the evidence of the heritability of fear and anxiety.
- 2.3.12 The RSPCA does not believe that dogs should be raised or trained to bite in order to protect property or people, with the exception of police and armed forces dogs. Dogs trained to bite must be under appropriate physical controls (e.g. secure fencing and warning signage on properties where such dogs are kept, and appropriate muzzles when out in the community) to ensure public safety. This is the responsibility of the owner and/or person in charge.
- 2.4 *Strategies for government to prevent dog bite incidents*
 - 2.4.1 All levels of government should adopt a consistent and evidence-based approach to strategies to effectively reduce dog bite incidents in Australian communities.
 - 2.4.2 Policies should focus on a holistic approach that includes responsible owner/handler practices, improving community understanding of dog behaviour and how to interact safely with dogs, and management of the environment and human-dog interactions to reduce risks, including acknowledging that the potential for injury is related to dog size.
 - 2.4.3 Mandatory identification (by microchip) and registration of all dogs provides a database of owned dogs and traceability for transfers or movements of dogs across owners and jurisdictions.
 - 2.4.4 Regulations alone are insufficient to reduce the risk of dog bite incidents and need to be supported by preventive education programs and research.
 - 2.4.5 Training and education on responsible dog ownership should be made readily available to prospective and current dog owners. This could be facilitated by a nationally consistent online education program that is made available for community access with the view of improving people's understanding of dog behaviour, dogs' physical and mental needs, and appropriate and safe dog-human interactions (including appropriate socialisation and enrichment), and how to reduce potential risks from their dog. All training, education, and resources should be evidence-based, regularly reviewed and updated when indicated, and should promote effective positive reinforcement training.

2.5 *Reducing occupational risk related to dogs*

Steps must be taken by dog owners, government, organisations, and businesses to recognise and mitigate dog-related hazards to workers (e.g. veterinarians, dog trainers, postal workers, and other workers accessing dog owner's properties such as carers). This could include:

- managing home and work environments to reduce the risk of dogs being encountered unnecessarily
- actively managing interactions with dogs and taking steps to reduce risk (including owners recognising that any dog may bite, especially in specific and stressful situations such as when an unfamiliar person enters their home or in a veterinary environment)
- taking a risk-based approach that acknowledges that the potential for injury is related to dog size
- providing appropriate training and education opportunities for staff to understand dog behaviour and adequately assess whether it is safe for a worker to enter a property, how to safely interact with unknown dogs, and how to react if unexpectedly approached by a dog displaying aggressive or fearful behaviours
- making sure that workers have appropriate personal protective equipment at work and know how to use it.

3 Response

3.1 *Incident response*

3.1.1 Following a dog bite incident, prompt and effective responses are important and should include (as relevant):

- appropriate injury management (for humans and other animals)
- effective and appropriate restraint and handling of the dog involved (handling of a dog after a bite incident should be sensitive to common reasons for biting behaviour - fear, pain, perceived threat to the dog's safety or to possession of a resource)
- recording of relevant details of dog owner(s), victim(s), and any witnesses
- reporting to the local authority where appropriate
- support of victims
- a veterinary assessment of the dog to determine if there may be health-related factors contributing to the bite incident (e.g. pain or neurological disease)
- an assessment of ongoing risk based on severity of potential injury (considering the dog's size, intensity of the bite, and the bite score) and the probability of a bite incident re-occurring (considering the circumstances surround the bite and triggers) by a veterinarian with expertise in dog behaviour or a suitably qualified dog behaviourist
- effective steps to safeguard the safety and well-being of the people, other animals, and dog/s involved.

3.1.2 If there is a near miss incident (e.g. menacing or rushing), the advice of a veterinarian with expertise in dog behaviour or a suitably qualified dog behaviourist should be promptly sought, and actions taken to mitigate the risk of a repeat incident or escalation. Methods must be humane, and should be low-stress, force-free, reward-based, and prioritise positive reinforcement. Aversive equipment and methods must not be used. See [Policy 7.7](#) for more detail.

3.2 *Regulatory considerations*

3.2.1 All jurisdictions should consistently adopt an evidence-based standard operating procedure that is used to direct a fair and uniform response to dog bite incidents. Local government officers should be provided with sufficient support, training, and information to allow them to appropriately follow the dog bite incident response standard operating procedure.

- 3.2.2 The response to a dog bite incident should include collection of data by responding local government officers relating to what happened prior to the incident (context/human factors/dog factors), the severity of dog bite (using a standardised scale), and the history of that individual dog.
- 3.2.3 Declaration of a dog as dangerous or menacing should be based on reliable evidence of the behaviour of the dog.
- 3.2.4 Regulation must allow for a fair process for appeal and consideration of evidence.
- 3.2.5 When a dog is impounded during initial investigation, notification/appeal period, or while awaiting court proceedings to determine the fate of the dog, measures must be taken to provide the dog with appropriate care which safeguards their physical health and mental wellbeing (see also [RSPCA Policy A7.9 Impounding of animals](#)). Court proceedings that involve an impounded dog should be prioritised above those where a dog is not impounded.
- 4 Management of dogs declared as menacing or dangerous
 - 4.1 *People- and dog related factors*

Effective preventative measures must be taken to manage the environment and human-dog interactions to reduce the risk of unsafe interactions with menacing or dangerous dogs and safeguard the welfare of dogs. See 2. Prevention.
 - 4.2 *Regulatory considerations*
 - 4.2.1 The oversight of dogs identified as dangerous⁷ or menacing⁸ is the responsibility of the states and territories and is carried out at the local government level. Each jurisdiction has their own legislated definition for dogs declared by local government to be dangerous or menacing.
 - 4.2.2 State governments should coordinate their policies to promote greater national consistency in their approach to management of dogs considered dangerous or menacing.
 - 4.2.3 A dog who has been declared a dangerous dog under a law of a municipality, State, or Territory that corresponds with the relevant Act should be recognised as such in all Australian municipalities, States, and Territories.
 - 4.2.4 Adequate resourcing must be allocated to enable effective enforcement and strategies to prevent dog bite incidents.
 - 4.2.5 Where a dog has been declared dangerous, the dog and the dog's place of residence should be clearly identified to indicate this to any observer (e.g. via an approved specifically coloured collar and approved signage on all access points to the property visible to adults and children).
 - 4.2.6 A specific national registry should be established to enable the centralised registration of all declared dangerous and menacing dogs throughout the country. The registry should:
 - be administered by an appropriate government body.
 - be accessible to all local government authorities, councils, veterinarians, and animal shelters
 - contain sufficient details to enable interstate traceability, notification to destination municipality, ongoing management handover, and facilitate benchmarking, identification of trends, and routine evaluation to inform future prevention and successful long-term management strategies

⁷ A dog may be described as 'dangerous' when the dog has bitten another person or animal, resulting in serious physical injury or death to a person or other animal. Exceptions to classifying a dog as dangerous by this definition are considered where a dog has been clearly provoked into biting a human or other animal in self-defence, defence of a human or their property, or where a dog instinctively bit an animal normally considered as prey.

⁸ A dog may be described as 'menacing' when a reasonable person fears that the dog's behaviour indicates that the dog may cause serious physical injury or death to a person or other animal.

- include owner information that relates to any offences committed under state animal management legislation.
- 4.2.7 Owners of declared menacing dogs should be given the option for their dog to be assessed after appropriate intervention for possible rescindment of a 'menacing' declaration.
- 4.2.8 Owners of declared dangerous dogs should be given the option for their dog to be assessed after appropriate intervention for refinement of the conditions imposed upon keeping the dog to improve the dog's welfare.