



Risk Assessing Dogs and Other Pets in Homes with Children

Introduction

The Child H Serious Case Review (SCR) published in 2019 reviewed the circumstances which led to a disabled child suffering life-threatening injuries following an attack by a dog within the family home.

The Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership (formerly Bristol Safeguarding Children Board) has responded to the recommendations made in the SCR [here](#), and this guidance can be read alongside the response.

Family pets bring many benefits but at the same time all animals (and dogs in particular) are a potential risk, especially to families with young and non-mobile or disabled children.

Several animal welfare charities provide guidance for families to keep children safe around dogs (see Additional Resources) which include teaching children the correct way to behave around animals, and keeping animals happy and healthy to prevent irritability.

Whilst this advice is valid, as professionals working with families our duty of care is to keep the children safe. It must never be forgotten that young children, babies, and potentially children with disabilities cannot necessarily alter their behaviour with an animal even when asked to do so. Families need to be advised that there is no substitute for constant supervision.

This guidance aims to reinforce the recommendations of the Child H Serious Case Review and to share strategies which have been devised by staff in Bristol working with families where dogs may be present.

Advice for Families

The Child H Serious Case Review recommends that practitioners should be encouraged to: *proactively ask parents whether there are pets in the households they visit, and advise accordingly as follows:*

1. **Never leave your child alone with a dog, even your own.**
2. Supervise your child when they are with a pet. If the animal looks unhappy, remove them to somewhere they feel safe.
3. Never allow your child to approach an animal they don't know.

Standardised, up to date, and evidence based information on keeping safe around dogs for operational practitioners in universal services is maintained by the RSPCA and should be made available and delivered to families by those practitioners (see Additional Resources).

This guide particularly references dogs as a common household pet which requires risk assessment. For guidance relating to less common pets, [Health Promotion Ireland has produced guidance](#) which encompasses cats, reptiles, birds, fish, rabbits and rodents.

Advice for Professionals

Staff who are required to visit families at home may find themselves in the presence of animals which are an unknown quantity. Your safety is paramount.

Consider the following approaches which have been shared by teams who regularly conduct home visits to families with pets:

1. Before beginning work with a family, review any information available on the family records to aid the completion of a risk assessment before entering a family home.
2. Bristol City Council Staff have access to the Corporate Safety Information System where there is a list of flagged addresses; practitioners should make use of this resource.
3. Remember to consider the presence of pets (particularly dogs) as a potential risk in family households, and factor in the fact that young, non-mobile and disabled children may be unable to alter their behaviour around an animal as part of a risk assessment.
4. Advise that children should never be left alone with dogs, and consider whether appropriate resources can be passed on to the family.
5. Dogs can potentially be used to intimidate members of staff. If you have any concerns prior to a visit consider calling ahead to ask for the dog to be put away into a secure place such as the kitchen or garden.
6. Concerns about an unsafe dog should be shared with the Dog Warden for [Bristol](#) or [South Gloucestershire](#) as appropriate. Professionals are not expected to be able to identify dangerous dogs.
7. Consider sharing information with other agencies who may visit the home if you consider a dog to be unsafe.

Additional Resources

This is a list of resources that provide advice for both professionals and families for keeping children safe around pets. Consider which is most useful for your work and, if relevant, which is appropriate to be delivered to the families you work with. All emphasise the key message to **never leave a child unsupervised with a dog**.

- **Title: Keeping babies and children safe around dogs in the home**
Source: Institute of Health Visiting: <https://ihv.org.uk/for-health-visitors/resources-for-members/resource/ihv-tips-for-parents/managing-minor-illness-and-reducing-accidents/keeping-babies-children-safe-around-dogs-home/>
Format: 2 page printable PDF factsheet.
Description: This resource contains tips for parents around preparing a dog for the arrival of a baby, how to keep dogs safe around a baby, and behaviour to encourage in children as they grow older and interact with dogs. This is particularly useful for health visitors, midwifery and other professionals who may be working with new-born infants or a family expecting a baby where there is already a dog in the household, but may be less useful for older children or families where dogs and children are already both present in the home. Aimed at families and suitable to be printed and delivered

- **Title: The six golden rules to keeping children safe and dogs happy**
Source: RSPCA <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/company/children/safe>
Format: 1 page printable PDF poster / infographic. Code is also available to embed the infographic on websites.
Description: Brief, visual infographic outlining what to teach children to encourage safe behaviour around dogs, aimed at carers/families. Can be printed and delivered directly to parents or displayed in professional offices or on websites. This is a useful simple and memorable tool for safe behaviours, but does not address where children may be non-mobile or disabled and unable to modify their own behaviour.

- **Title: Staying safe with dogs**
Source: Dogs Trust <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/factsheets-downloads/stay%20safe%20around%20dogs.pdf>
Format: 2 page PDF document that can be printed and folded into a tri-fold leaflet.
Description: Contains information about understanding a dog's behaviour in order to recognise risk. Also contains tips around behaviours to encourage in children, and how to act around unknown dogs. Aimed at dog-owning carers / families, but the tips for approaching unknown dogs may also be useful for professionals and non dog owning families. Actions for keeping children safe are based around encouraging certain behaviours and does not address where this is not possible for non-mobile and/or disabled children, although the recognition of dog behaviour may be useful for these families.

- **Title: Keeping your toddler safe around dogs**
Source: Blue Cross <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-advice/keeping-your-toddler-safe-around-dogs>
Format: 2 page printable PDF leaflet. There is also an option to request Blue Cross to deliver

educational talks to children and families around pet safety.

Description: This is a readable leaflet with tips for carers/families specifically for toddler aged children. Due to the age of the children more emphasis is placed on actions that parents can take around their dog, which is likely to be more appropriate for young or disabled children who may not be able to modify their behaviour. While the leaflet is printable and can be delivered to any family, Education or childcare professionals may wish to consider requesting an educational talk from Blue Cross to deliver to groups of children and/or their families.

➤ **Title: Child Safety and Health Around Pets: Responsible Pet Ownership**

Source: Health Promotion Ireland <https://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00795.pdf>

Format: 18 page pet safety guidance document

Description: This is a comprehensive guidance booklet written to advise parents and carers on child safety with pets. A range of pets and hazards are included, including correct hygiene as well as bites or attacks. Advice is also given on what to do should a child be bitten. While this document is directed to a carer as written, this guidance is likely to be most useful to professionals to consider and tailor their own advice as appropriate. It should also be noted that the document is quite basically formatted which affects its readability, and contains some recommended contacts which are specific to Ireland.

➤ **Title: Dangerous Dogs and Safeguarding Children**

Source: Bath and North East Somerset LSCB online procedures (SWCPP)
https://www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/banes/p_dangerous_dogs.html

Format: Online only resource for professionals

Description: Online chapter containing advice for professionals around assessing risks to children and actions that can be taken. It also contains links to further resources and references to relevant legislation, such as the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991), the Animal Welfare Act (2006), and the Anti-social behaviour, Crime and Policing Act (2014).