

### Communication – Context - Curiosity

**Why Dogs Matter in Safeguarding:** Dogs are common in family homes and can offer emotional, developmental and wellbeing benefits to children. However, many children and adults have been **seriously injured or killed by dogs**, making it essential that practitioners routinely assess risks when dogs are present. Research also shows that **children are most often bitten by a dog they know**, usually in the home. Professionals must therefore consider **both the welfare of the child and their own safety** when visiting dog-owning households.

**What type of dog is in the household:** Some breeds and types are prohibited under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991

- Pit Bull Terrier
- Japanese Tosa
- Dogo Argentino
- Fila Brasileiro
- XL Bully (recently added)

If a professional becomes aware of a prohibited breed, they must **report it to the police immediately**. However, guidance also stresses that any dog can be dangerous, regardless of breed, especially if poorly trained, badly looked after or subject to neglect or abuse.

**Is the dog showing concerning behaviour:** A dog is legally considered dangerously out of control if there is reasonable apprehension it may injure a person, even if it does not actually do so. Be aware of:

- Aggression, unpredictability, guarding behaviours
- Overprotectiveness towards a particular adult or child
- Nervous, fearful or stressed behaviour
- Signs of poor management or lack of control (e.g., roaming, no secure areas)
- Previous history of attacks or near misses

**What is known about the owner's behaviour and caregiving capacity:** The behaviour and circumstances of the owner significantly influence risk, for example consider:

- Is the dog being cared for appropriately?
- Is the owner able to control the dog?
- Are there concerns about substance misuse, domestic abuse, or neglect, which may increase the likelihood of dangerous dog behaviour?
- Is there evidence of animal abuse, which may be part of a wider pattern of harm and abuse in the home?

Professionals should be alert to the potential link between animal abuse and family violence, though this is not an automatic indicator. Effective multi-agency assessment is required.

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**What is the level of risk to the child:** Practitioners must consider:

- The child's age and developmental stage (young children are most vulnerable to bites).
- How the child interacts with the dog (e.g., hugging, close facial contact may be perceived as threatening).
- The household's ability to supervise and manage dog child interactions.
- Whether the dog has access to sleeping areas or unsupervised spaces where a child plays.
- Whether parents display safe behaviours (e.g., teaching children how to interact safely with pets).

**Professional Safety During Home Visits:** Dogs may behave aggressively towards unfamiliar visitors, especially in their "territory." Professionals should:

- Assess risks before entering the home.
- Request dogs be placed in another room or secured during visits.
- Terminate a visit if safety cannot be ensured.
- Document risks and alert line manager

**When to Refer or Escalate:** A referral to Children's Social Care should be made when:

- A child has been injured by a dog.
- A dog is identified as prohibited, dangerous, or out of control.
- There are concerns that the owner cannot safely manage the dog.
- The dog's behaviour contributes to an already risky household environment.
- There are indicators of broader safeguarding concerns (neglect, domestic abuse, coercive control, substance misuse).

**Information to Gather for Assessments:** Practitioners are advised to collect:

- Details of all dogs in the home or regularly in contact with the child.
- Dog's breed or type, history of aggression, and how it is kept.
- Owner's understanding of dog behaviour, supervision practices, and home environment.
- Any previous concerns raised by professionals, neighbours, schools or police.
- Observations of interactions during home visits (child-dog and owner-dog).

**Key Messages for Safeguarding Professionals:**

- Always ask about dogs when assessing families—this should be routine practice.
- Any dog can be dangerous, regardless of breed.
- Owner behaviour and home circumstances are often the biggest predictors of risk.
- Young children are particularly vulnerable, especially when unsupervised.
- Professional safety must be a central consideration during home visits.
- Immediate police involvement is required if a prohibited breed or dangerously out-of-control dog is identified.
- Multi agency assessment is crucial where dog risks intersect with other safeguarding concerns.