

# Child Death Review Programme

## Rapid Review: Deaths of children from dog bites/strikes

This is a summary of a rapid review of deaths of children from dog bites/strikes. The review considered readily available information on deaths of children due to dog bites or strikes that could inform activity to prevent future deaths or identify further work that would be of benefit.

### What we did

We examined media reports of deaths due to dog bites/strikes from Wales and England; published literature on risks of dog bites and their prevention; hospital admission data for dog bites/strikes in Wales; and recommendations by coroners in Wales.

### What we found

Dogs have an important place in society and are valued companions for many families throughout Wales. For most families, dogs play an important, healthy part of family life.

Deaths from dog bites/strikes are rare. Serious injuries from dog bites/strikes are more common, with about 114 hospital admissions a year in Wales. In young children dog bites/strikes most often affect the face and head, and usually require specialist care under plastic or maxillo-facial surgeons. There are more admissions among children from more deprived areas, and also from those residents of some geographical areas.

Media reports of the relatively small number of deaths in the UK in recent years suggests most deaths occur in infants, with some occurring in older ages, especially early school age. The dog is usually reported as being familiar to the family, though not necessarily owned by immediate family. The owner may not be present.

Expert advice suggests that dog breed is

not a good predictor of risk; other factors including the history of the dog, socialisation and context of the event are important.

Leaflets for families on safety with dogs are available from various agencies both from within and beyond the UK. Routine national literature to new parents does not include any specific advice on dog safety.

### What we don't know

We found little evidence as to what works in preventing serious injury from dog bites/strikes in children. Those studies we found related to education of school age children. We have not found evidence to demonstrate lasting changes in knowledge or behaviour.

We did not examine detailed official records of these deaths; media reports may be inaccurate. We may not have identified all relevant literature.

Hospital admissions data for dog bites/strikes suggests important differences across Wales, which have not yet been examined further.

We did not examine any issues of responsible ownership or the relationship between dog welfare and child welfare.

We were unable to draw any conclusion on the role of regulatory measures in terms of responsible ownership or risk of child injury.



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## Opportunities for prevention

We conclude the single most important advice for members of the public is:

***never leave a baby or young child unsupervised with a dog, even for a moment, no matter how well you know that dog.***

This, and other messages, could be highlighted to all new parents in a balanced way, emphasising that it is relevant to any contact with dogs, including when the child is in the care of others. Opportunities to highlight these messages include midwife contact antenatally, through health visitors in their capacity as advocates for child safety within communities and working with individual families, inclusion in updates of [\*Bump, baby and beyond\*](#)\* and the parent held personal child health record. Other routes relating to public information on home and family safety could be explored to communicate this message with families, including contact through local authorities services and Families First.

There are opportunities to ensure that dog owners are aware of the risks to children, and aware of the need to share that advice with others who may be caring for the dog when the owner is not present. Such messages could be reinforced through breeders, veterinarians and others.

## Other work that could be considered

- Further epidemiological examination of available data relating to dog bite admission and deaths may be valuable. Consideration of the reasons for higher rates in particular geographical areas may also be beneficial.
- Any interventions put in place following this review could incorporate planned evaluation, for example in relation to parental understanding of risk or admissions of children to hospital.
- Further research into the effectiveness of interventions to reduce the risk of serious injury to infants, toddlers and older children, from dog bites/strikes would be beneficial.

The full rapid review report is also available to accompany this summary.

\* Public Health Wales NHS Trust. *Bump, Baby & Beyond*. 2014. Available at: [www.bumpbabyandbeyond.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.bumpbabyandbeyond.wales.nhs.uk)