PROGRAM FOR HANDLING AND SURVIVING AGGRESSIVE EVENTS.

No one wishes to be victimized by an aggressive cat or dog, but it is a sad commentary on the frequency of this event that more than 50% of all children in the United States 11 years of age and younger have been bitten by a cat or dog. Understanding which canine and feline behaviours indicate a potentially aggressive response can help people and avoid attacks by animals. If the person behaves cautiously and appropriately, even if the attack cannot be avoided damage from the attack can be minimized. Most Serious bites to people that occur in the United States and Europe involve dogs; therefore this program focuses primarily on avoiding dog bites, but the information can also be adapted to avoiding injury by cats.

The following program and information used at Camden Valley Animal Hospitals have been developed over a long time utilizing the skills programs and information from national and international veterinary specialists. Some of the sources we would like to acknowledge include the Behaviour Clinic at the Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (VHUP). Drs K Overall, I Dunbar, B Fogle, R Mugford, V Voith, L Ackerman K Seksel, S Heath, G Landsberg, W Hunthausen, D Horwitz, and trainers C L Benjamin, D Weston, and R Ross.

These Programs have been and continue to be developed and refined to meet the pets' needs and to minimize the person's confusion about how to work with a problem pet. Accordingly, as more is learned about behavioural problems and their treatment, these programs will evolve

THE UNFAMILIAR DOG

Dogs that are unfamiliar to individual people pose a different set of problems when considering the potential to be bitten than do familiar dogs. These dogs are responsible for less than 40% of the bites inflicted upon people in the Australia. Most dogs that bite people in public places or in their communities are not strays - they are owned by someone and may be good pets but they are loose and free ranging. Some general information about the behaviour of free-ranging dogs can help people avoid being bitten.

1. Dogs in groups are often more confident and reactive than single dogs.
2. Single dogs are more wary but are possibly more likely to bite if cornered.
3. Dogs are bolder and more confident if they are close to their home territory. Unfortunately because the dog is unfamiliar to the people it is often the case the people do not know where the dog's home territory is.
4. Dogs often find staring threatening.
5. Dogs have a strong response to fleeing prey. They will often chase individuals who are running away from them. In any case four footed animals with large shearing teeth have all the advantages. They are usually significantly faster and they are better balanced.
6. Some of the vocalization we make can excite dogs and may elicit active pursuit. This is particularly the case with children. We need to teach children to be quiet around unfamiliar dogs.
7. Dogs can often misinterpret many of the gestures we make. Waving your arms, throwing stones, sticks or any item at the dog often excites the dog and or may intensify its aggression.

8. The infirm and young humans are less capable of successfully retreating and or fend off an attack. Therefore they are far more likely to be seriously injured by a dog attack. They are often less able to move in a coordinated manner or anticipate the aggressive event. The dog may become excited due to the erratic behaviour of the people. In fact, the mortality rate for people in these groups is much higher than for fit adults.

9. All breeds are capable of being involved in dog attacks. Although recent data shows “White fluffy, female dogs that have been allowed to sleep in their owners bed and that have had a skin condition prior to reaching 12 months of age” are the most common dog to bite people, the more severe injuries and often the fatalities are invariably inflicted by large (>30Kg) dogs. It is inappropriate and incorrect to say that certain breeds are more aggressive than others. The greater the size of dog to person size mismatch, the more damage that will be done. If a large dog attacks a child, the chance of serious and often fatal injury increases dramatically.

With these points in mind, children should be encouraged not to play with unfamiliar dogs. Under no circumstances should children play with dogs unless a competent adult supervises both the dog and the child. This advice is as much for the dog’s protection as it is for the child’s. Both children and dogs can be unpredictable and the interaction can occasionally be minefield. Many dogs only respond aggressively to a child after an extended period of abuse, but the dog will never get the benefit of the doubt. People should protect their dogs and their children.

If an unfamiliar or at large dog approaches a child in a public place, the child should tell an adult immediately and the adult should tell someone responsible for the maintenance of the open space. If the dog is clearly friendly and solicitous, the adult may make the decision to take the dog home, but any dog that is exhibiting any wariness or threat should be avoided at all costs. Threat postures in dogs include wide legged stances with lowered heads, growling and baring of teeth, pupil dilation and staring, and piloerection. Dogs that wag their tails are only indicating their willingness to interact: they are not communicating that they are friendly. People should remember that interactions could be good or bad.

If a worrisome dog approaches a person, he or she should take the following actions:

1. Avoid looking or staring directly at the dog: Do not take your eyes off the dog but look at the dog obliquely and out of the corner of the eye;
2. Back up slowly; ensuring you do not trip over anything;
3. Keep your arms straight down at your sides and move legs and arms slowly do not fail arms or make sudden bolting movements;
4. Talk calmly and soothingly in a low voice if this calms the dog. If it seems to excite the dog or intensify its’ aggression keep silent.
5. Stand up straight I.E. stand as tall as possible.
6. Move straight to a safe area eg. Into a building, motor vehicle, behind a truck etc.
University Veterinary Teaching Hospital Sydney

This is the same advice given in wilderness situations for handling the approach of mountain lions, bears, or wolves.

Do not run! Just because the dog is standing still do not assume you can out run it. It is unlikely you can out run it unless you can get to safety in a few steps. Running triggers a chase response in a dog and you have to turn your back to run - do not do it.

Once you are away from the dog, call for help and wait until it comes.

Practice the previously mentioned techniques with children. Furthermore, teach children that if a dog is jumping at them, they should fall directly and silently to the ground, curl up in a ball, and cover their heads with their hands and arms. Kids should be taught to look like armadillos when threatened by advancing dogs. This is also good advice for anyone who accidentally trips during the process of getting away from a dog.

Finally if the dog makes contact with you, stay calm, stay silent, and do not get into a tug of war over any of your body parts. This last piece of advice is difficult to enact, but it is important. In situations involving actual bites from dogs, the majority of the damage is done when a person tries to pull an arm or afflicted area from the dog's mouth. The dog's innate response is to tighten its hold with its jaws and to shake the victim. These two behaviours are the prime culprits in profound attacks that result in debilitation and death. Be calm, once the dog releases its grip, follow the previously mentioned steps and try to get away.

If a dog grabs a child do not struggle with the dog for the child - the child will be injured more. Instead look for something to throw over (a blanket) or at (a bucket of water) the dog to stop the behaviour. Be calm and quiet. Encourage the child to be quiet and go limp. Try to distract the dog. If you are successful with this advice the outcome may still be awful, but it will always be much worse if you get into a physical contest with the dog.

**FAMILIAR DOGS**

Familiar or known dogs, in context, are defined as dogs that pose a risk to the people they live with. These types of attacks are common and make up the rest of the dog bites inflicted upon people. Remember any “Little cute dog is able to bite”. All dogs have the potential to attack people and no child should ever be left alone with any dog.

It is common the person attacked by the familiar dog may not be aware of the dog’s problem aggression.

The first step in the treatment of any canine or feline aggression is for all people to avoid any circumstances that are known to be associated with aggression. This means that the people are responsible for protecting children and unsuspecting friends from their dog. If safety requires that the dog be banished when people come to visit, the dog must be banished. People will feel guiltier if their dog mauls a child than if the dog spends the day in the bedroom. Again it should be pointed out that this is as much for the dog's protection as for the humans. If the visiting children are going to run free, the bedroom in which the dog is ensconced must be locked. Remember, kids can be unpredictable. In the absence of any other information, people should assume that if their dog has a problem aggression that they couldn’t take a chance with that aggression and with people whom the dog does not know. Dogs become more reactive when people are excited, and problem dogs, in particular, become more reactive in unfamiliar, noisy circumstances. A little common sense and discipline can save a lot of heartbreak.
People must protect themselves from their pet's aggression by learning to give the pet cues that encourage appropriate behaviour and separate cues that tell the pet that it will be ignored by the person rather than being rewarded with interaction. This means that people must change their own behaviour to change the pet's behaviour. Although it is true that the people invariably did not cause the pet's problem, they have the responsibility for managing and or fixing it. If you know that the dog is more aggressive when it is allowed to sleep on their bed, the dog should not be allowed to sleep on their bed until it has learnt to get off the bed when asked. If the dog is not able to do this it should not be allowed into the bedroom because they will always be at risk. If you know that the dog growls every time people groom or pet the dog, people must avoid grooming or petting until the dog can lie down and relax. The Use of Gentle Leader Head collar can hasten this response and render the dog safe. Under no circumstances must people ever believe that they have to put their own safety at risk to make progress in changing their pet's behaviour. This is absolutely wrong.

People should remember that dogs read body language much better than people and will pick up on any uncertainty. Whether they can smell "fear" is unimportant; they will take advantage of any pause or uncertainty in the person's behaviour. People also need to remember that every time the dog or cat with problem behaviour is allowed to practice the behaviour, it is learning that this is a good way of getting what it needs and it is getting practicing and getting better at doing it. Avoidance is the key.

If people take all precautions and the dog still threatens them, the people should back away in the manner described previously for unknown dogs.

People whose dogs have known aggression problems have an advantage over the situation described above because they are able to keep devices like blankets water pistols, air horns and spray canisters on their person or in the room where they interact with the dog so that they can distract the dog or protect themselves should the dog intensify its aggression.

If the people give the dog a command to sit, whether part of a behaviour modification program or not, and the dog begins to growl or otherwise become aggressive they should gently try to get the dog to relax using a verbal cues. If this does not work, the people should release the dog (not reward it) and slowly back away.

It is not about “winning” or “dominating” the dog. It is far better to ignore the dog than to struggle with the dog. People invariably succeed at doing neither but instead teach the dog more about the person’s fears and it needs to do to get what it wants. Even if the people must repeatedly avoid the dog, this is preferable to physically contesting the dog.

If the people are consistent and use all the resources the dog wants it will ultimately approach and be willing to exhibit desired behaviours in exchange for the treats etc. In extreme cases this can take days.

It may be hard-hearted, but the dog will not starve to death. However, in these extreme cases if people are overly sympathetic for the dog, the dog will only go the minimum it has to, to get what it wants and the behaviour modification process will backslide will not work. If the dog continues to threaten the people and avoidance does not elicit desired behaviours, the people should control the situation so that the dog is behind a closed door or in a safely fenced area. Sometimes just letting the dog into the backyard can interrupt the aggression and the people can begin the modification process again.
Keep the dog behind the barrier for as long as is necessary for the dog to calm down.

People may feel guilty and sympathetic to the dog and try to interact with it before the animal can rationally learn anything from the interaction. Such responses usually intensify the aggression.

The longer it takes the dog to calm down, the worse the prognosis (i.e., if the dog was snarling yesterday and 20 hours later still cannot be approached for feeding, the people should question their success in reliably changing this behaviour into a safe and loving one).

A common situation that leads to people been bitten is when the person tries to separate fighting dogs. Generally speaking the injuries the dogs are likely to inflict upon each other are less than the injuries they inflict on people. This is due to differences in anatomy. You must not get caught up in this situation but it should also be stated that they should not be allowed to “FIGHT IT OUT”. It is uncommon that dogs will fight to the death but it does happen. Being prepared with blankets, solid barriers (like an old door), water hoses etc can help to distract and subsequently separate these animals.

Yelling, screaming, waving your arms about etc. often excites the dogs and may make the situation worse. Do not introduce an unprotected piece of human flesh into this situation. If you are bitten at best you will receive insignificant injuries but your dog may well learn to bite people.

If any dog bites a person the person should freeze and not struggle with the dog. They should not get into a struggle over body parts. They should go limp, look away, become small and quiet, and slowly retreat at the first opportunity.

People often feel anger and a sense of disappointment and betrayal when their dog bites them. This is normal but the dog, particularly if they have abnormal behaviour, cannot respond rationally to those feelings. The people should remove themselves from the situation as quickly as possible. Leave the dog alone to be quiet. They should not punish the dog physically; no matter how angry or hurt they are this will only make matters worse. The person should seek any required medical care and then calmly approach the dog using the deference and relaxation measures that the dog has been taught. If the person is either too fearful or too physically emotional to do this or no longer wants to work with the dog after such an event, the prognosis is poor. They should never feel forced to work with a dog that terrifies or endangers them. They may feel sad about their decision to euthanize their dog (or in some cases place it in another home, if this is possible), but there is no reason to feel guilty if the people behaved as previously mentioned. The people who feel guilty are the ones, who were unable to act in the safe, rational manner discussed here, and who inadvertently and unintentionally, encouraged their dog’s inappropriate behaviours.

If you have any further questions regarding any of these matters please contact the hospital 02 9531 3437.