

Risk assessing dogs and other pets in homes with children



Why this guide?

Recent case reviews in Bolton have identified a recurrent theme of 'prevalence and care of pets in child safeguarding'. While family pets bring many benefits, they require significant attention in their own right and, in some circumstances, when this is not provided or is lacking this may increase risk to children in the household.

This guide has been developed to support all practitioners to consider the needs and risks associated with family pets when completing an assessment. This should then assist practitioners in making decisions about how best to keep children safe in the context of family pets.

How to use this guide

Use the questions on page 3 to structure a conversation with parents/carers and, where appropriate, with children. Record what you see (for example, the animal's presentation and the home environment), what you are told, and any action taken. Consider the age and stage of development of the child, including any special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and adjust questions accordingly.

What to capture in your assessment (minimum)

- Animals in the home: type/breed (if known), size, age, sex, number of animals, and who owns/is responsible for day-to-day care.
- Child contact: which children interact with which animals, how often, and what supervision looks like in practice (not just what is intended).
- Environment and management: where animals sleep, are fed, and go to the toilet; use of crates/gates/segregation; hygiene risks (especially with babies/toddlers).
- Behaviour and history: any growling/snapping/biting, chasing, guarding, anxiety, or past incidents (including with visitors/other animals).
- Health and welfare: registration with a vet, vaccinations/flea/worm treatment, neutering (if relevant), visible injuries/poor condition, and access to food/water/shelter/exercise.
- Stressors and wider context: parental capacity, substance use, domestic abuse, mental health, housing instability, and any other factors that may reduce safe supervision and animal care.
- Actions taken: advice given, safety plan agreed, referrals made, and who will follow up (including timescales).

The questions on page 3 provide a framework to begin a conversation and exploration of pets in the family home. The framework is not intended to be an exhaustive list; it is designed to prompt professional curiosity about the care, welfare and impact of pets on family life and children's safety.

Particular consideration should be given where there are multiple pets in a household and why this may be the case. For example, if a family owns a number of dogs, explore the reasons for this and reflect on safety and welfare implications for family members as well as the animals. In some situations, keeping multiple pets may indicate contextual risks, for example, dogs kept for intimidation/criminality, frequent changes in dogs, injuries on dogs consistent with fighting, breeding/selling activity, or unexplained resources being used on animals. Using the framework can support these conversations and inform next steps.

How can we keep children safe around pets?

Children behave very differently to adults. They are often unpredictable and some children love to hug, kiss and be close to animals, whilst others might be scared. Children are often running around, playing or shouting. Pets can find this behaviour overwhelming and threatening. For this reason, children are more

likely to be bitten or harmed by pets than other age groups. But action can be taken to help parents and carers keep children and pets safe. Parents and carers should be advised to:-

- Stay with the child. It's important that an adult supervises any toddler or child when they are around pets. Never leave a child alone with a pet.
- Set some rules. Teach the child not to approach pets when they are eating, sleeping, unwell or tired.
- Give the pet a safe space. This can be a place for your pet to retreat to when they need. Children's behaviour can tire pets out, so allow them to have time to rest quietly.
- Encourage children to be gentle and calm. Some children love to hug and kiss animals, just like they would to humans. But this sort of behaviour can sometimes cause pets to become worried or angry. Do not let a child climb on them or pull their ears or tail. Remind children not to shout when around animals.
- Read the pet's communication and body language. Learning to understand a pet's behaviour can help you recognise signs of stress, fear or discomfort. When reading a pet's body language, consider the individual animal, their whole body and the context of their behaviour.

What happens if the pets are presenting a risk, or there are concerns about their welfare?

If a [dangerous or banned dog](#) is suspected or identified during an assessment, concerns should be reported to police (via 101) or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

If the concerns are about the risk posed by any other animal, or there are concerns about the safety and welfare of a family pet, report these to the RSPCA on 0300 1234 999 or at <https://www.rspca.org.uk/reportaconcern>.

Framework Questions: Pets In The Family Home

Use these prompts to support professional curiosity. Not all questions will be relevant for every family; focus on what helps you understand children's safety, supervision, and the animal's welfare.

Theme	Questions / prompts
Animals in the home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What animals are in the household (including visiting/temporarily staying animals)? How many? • What do you know about the animal(s): age, size, breed/type (if known), temperament, training? • Who owns the animal(s), and who is responsible for daily care?
Care, welfare and routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the animal registered with a vet? Up to date with vaccinations/flea/worm treatment? • How is the animal fed and exercised? What happens if the pet carer is unwell or absent? • Any concerns about neglect, injury, poor condition, aggressive handling, or the home environment?
Living environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the animal sleep? Where does it eat? Where does it go to the toilet? • Is there a safe space for the animal away from children (for example, a crate/bed/room) and is it used? • Are there hygiene risks for babies/toddlers (for example, animal faeces/urine, fleas, soiling)?
Child contact and supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which children have contact with the animal(s), and what does that contact look like day to day? • How are children supervised around the animal(s)? When is supervision most difficult (for example, busy routines, night-time, visitors)? • Have the family set clear rules (for example, not approaching when eating/sleeping, no hugging, no rough play)?

Behaviour, incidents and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the animal ever growled, snapped, bitten, chased, jumped up, or guarded food/toys/space? • Any incidents involving children, visitors, professionals, or other animals? What happened and what changed afterwards? • Are there signs the animal is fearful or stressed around children (for example, avoidance, stiff body, excessive panting)?
Wider context / potential indicators of other risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there are multiple dogs, what is the reason (companionship, breeding, guarding, business activity, etc.)? • Any concerns about intimidation, guarding of the property, restricted access to parts of the home, or dogs being used to control others? • Any signs of organised breeding/selling or dog fighting (for example, frequent litters, injuries, equipment, secrecy)?
Actions and safety planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What immediate steps are needed to reduce risk (for example, supervision plan, separation, muzzling advice via qualified support, veterinary/behavioural input)? • What advice has been given, what has been agreed, and who will follow up (with timescales)? • If a dangerous/banned dog is suspected, have you reported to police (101) / Crimestoppers (0800 555 111)? If welfare concerns, have you reported to the RSPCA?