

## Abstract

Delegates from around the world met at the University of Lincoln on June 11 and 12 for the third annual UK Dog Bite Prevention and Behaviour conference. The conference, hosted by dog trainer Victoria Stilwell, brings together dog behaviour experts to discuss possible solutions to this public health issue. Rachel Orritt, who has been examining the perceptions, assessment and management of human-directed aggressive behaviour in dogs for her PhD, reports.

IN previous years, the focus of the dog bite prevention conference has been on dog bites as a public health concern. In contrast, this year's conference began with an in-depth exploration of the ethology and aetiology of aggressive behaviour in dogs. Ádám Miklósi, director of the Family Dog Project at Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary, contrasted studies of wolves, feral dogs and pet dogs, and emphasised the biological functions of aggressive behaviour. He also noted that there was a 'total confusion of terms' in the scientific literature, which was perhaps limiting scientific understanding of aggressive behaviour in dogs.

Daniel Mills, professor of veterinary behavioural medicine at the University of Lincoln, presented various peer-reviewed studies with the aim of correcting some of the misconceptions about the term 'dominance'. Explaining the scientific basis of the term, he argued that 'dominance' was often incorrectly used to justify aversive handling, and stated that 'the human-dog relationship is not well represented by a simple linear hierarchy.' He added that, although it was the nature of scientific investigation to challenge previous ideas, 'once ideas permeate into the public consciousness they are hard to change.'

## Behaviour and training

Sarah Fisher, an animal behaviour counsellor, noted that, although there was a great deal of variety in the way that people approached dog training and behaviour, 'there is only one dog expert in any situation, and that's the dog itself.' Other speakers acknowledged the importance of evidence-based practice, and cautioned against the use of single factors (such as breed) to approximate risk level, where circumstances and individual differences might be more important.

Indeed, many speakers recognised that dog training as a whole was subject to an inertia that inhibited the acceptance of evidence-based techniques and viewpoints over punishment-based training methods, although pet dog training seemed to be more progressive in this regard than working dog training. During an account of a personal dog bite, Victoria Stilwell acknowledged that the majority of US police dogs were currently trained punitively, increasing the anxiety levels of these dogs and potentially leading to unintended bites.

The specific behavioural and training needs of 'high drive' dogs and dogs from working lines were discussed by Kamal Fernandez, a working dog trainer from east London. He noted that the behaviour of working dogs could be improved if their exercise needs were catered for, alongside the use of

reward-based training. It was also noted that the majority of working dog trainers in the UK still rely heavily on 'traditional' training techniques.

Moving on from discussions of aversive training techniques, Chirag Patel, an animal trainer, veterinarian and owner of the training and behaviour company 'Domesticated Manners', demonstrated more progressive training techniques in his presentation. The aim of these techniques was to give animals choice, both within training sessions and in daily life. He noted that 'so much of animal training is about compulsion, when really we should be encouraging voluntary participation', and argued that, by giving the animal more control over a situation, anxiety and frustration could be minimised, and trust could be developed between dog and handler, thereby reducing the likelihood of aggressive behaviour directed at people.

All the speakers (with the exception of Dr Miklósi, who was replaced by guest panellist Kendal Shepherd) took part in an hour-long panel discussion, a new feature of the conference this year. Panellists answered questions on topics such as the role of fear and frustration, and building a relationship with a new dog. In relation to the latter, panellists agreed that a 'less is more' approach involving careful observation was best, with Dr Patel advising that owners should 'listen to the whispers so that the dog has no need to scream.'

Although training dogs and teaching clients on an individual scale is important, many speakers acknowledged that awareness and education should be the focus of larger scale dog bite prevention strategies. Leah Hatley and Justine Schuurmans, founders of the New Jersey organisation 'The Family Dog', spoke with authority on increasing awareness and education, following the success of their campaign 'Stop the 77'. This ongoing campaign seeks to reduce the number of dog bites that occur as a result of a child interacting with a known dog, through the use of educational videos. They also emphasised the importance of reaching out to families to minimise the harm caused by aversive training methods, noting that 'training must be positive in families because children will mimic their parents' behaviour' – the implication being that a child using punitive training methods was more likely to get bitten.

Jo Pay, who acts as European coordinator for the organisation 'Victoria Stilwell Positively Dog Training', also explored owner factors, and advocated for professional empathy when dealing with clients whose dogs had behaved aggressively. She said that owners might experience shame or embarrassment about their dogs' behaviour, which may preclude them from seeking professional help.

The conference finished with a call to arms. It was agreed that, in order to effect change, dog bite prevention needed to be promoted as much as possible. The audience was left with the plea from Victoria Stilwell and other speakers to engage contacts on social media using the hashtag '#preventdogbites'. This was particularly encouraged during the second UK Dog Bite Prevention Week, which ran from June 12 to 19, in the hope that increased awareness would prompt owners,

organisations and governments to adopt a proactive approach to the prevention of aggressive behaviour in dogs.