

Wentworth Courier

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Picture: Julian Andrews

Good dog, bad dog

Rise in local attacks sees
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Bark and bite

Dog attacks, which have spiked since Covid, can often be put down to paw understanding between people and pets, writes Greg Flynn

Dogs: a potentially dangerous menace? No, no, drop that thought. Sit, stay, look here. The experts are keen you don't stigmatise all dogs. The solution, they agree, is to train the animals and educate the humans. The statistics, they say, tell only part of the story.

Those dog incident statistics include figures from the NSW Office of Local Government which reveal that from January to March this year, seven people were attacked by dogs in Woollahra, five in Randwick and two in Waverley.

Multiple factors are involved in dog attacks, says Dr Laura Taylor, head of animal care at the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home, and the answer is not as simple as "blaming the dogs or the owners or specifying a breed".

Taylor acknowledges that children are "often the victims of these really unfortunate incidents, so education about dog behaviour and bite prevention is important for the public – particularly children".

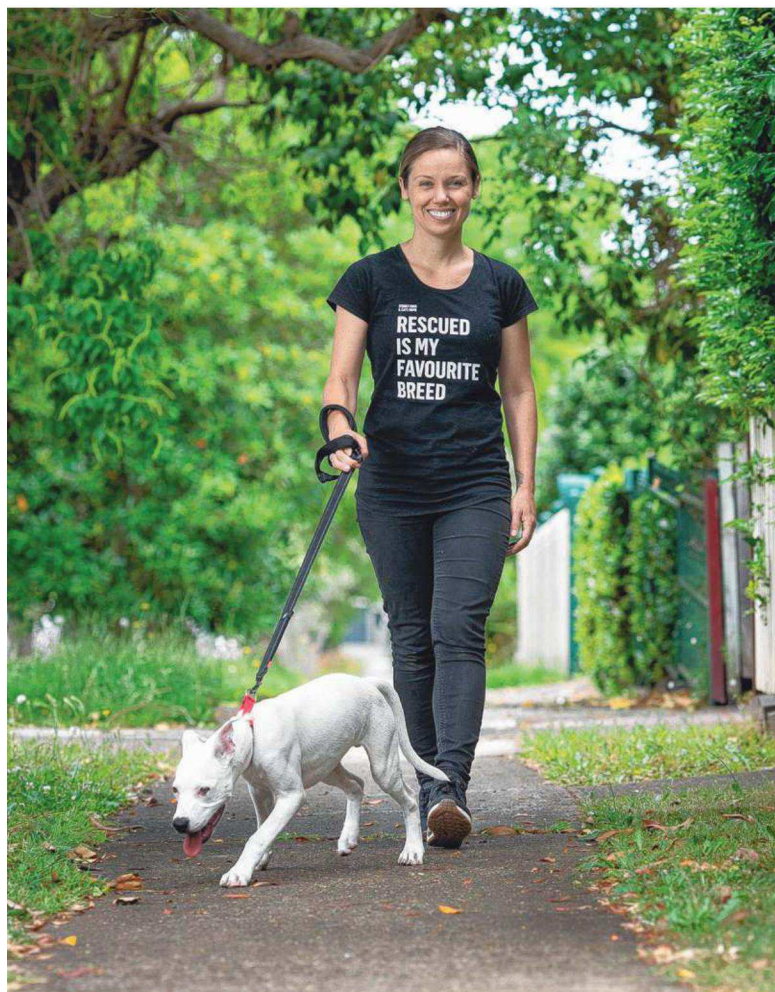
She says a lack of understanding of how a dog communicates is one cause of attacks.

"With animals there is a ladder of aggression and before a dog bites they usually have many ways in which they communicate that they're uncomfortable with a situation," she says.

"They can start off with subtle signs such as yawning, licking their lips or doing a shake off as if they've just come out of the water. We call these displacement behaviours because they're normal behaviour in an abnormal context.

"If a child or adult does not understand the communication and keeps approaching a dog, then the ladder of aggression can escalate to a growl. If that sign to go away isn't recognised by the person then the result could be a bite.

"The bite isn't going to come out



Dr Laura Taylor from the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home takes staffy/dalmatian cross rescue puppy Spaghetti (also pictured right) for a walk. Pictures: Julian Andrews

of nowhere, and the signs need to be recognised early. We need to educate parents, children, the general public and council rangers in these behavioural signs in animals."

As for educating animals, Taylor, who was previously at the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital, recommends all dog owners take their pets to trainers who use positive reinforcement techniques to manage a range of behaviours including preventing bite attacks.

Owners can also practise posi-

tive reinforcement at home, for example, if a dog is aggressive towards a postie.

"A dog barking at a mailman is not the animal trying to be dominant," Taylor says. "It's the dog saying: 'Mailman, you make me uncomfortable coming to my home. Go away.' You need to re-train the dog's brain that the mailman is not something to fear."

She suggests when the postie arrives, the owner should call the pet over, have them sit, "get them to use their 'thinking' brain" and give them a treat.

"This won't reinforce unwanted behaviour. What it will do is combat aggressive behaviour because, for the dog, there will be a positive association between seeing the mailman and getting a treat," she says.

On the subject of homes and keeping animals relaxed, readers might consider adopting the musical approach taken at the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home. According to Taylor, studies indicate classical music has a calming effect on a pet's brain.

"The music activates their parasympathetic nervous system and it lowers their heart rate and their blood pressure," she says.

"The tones and the notes of classical music have a very soothing effect and we play it at our shelter to reduce any stress they may be feeling."

For those considering buying a dog or adopting one from a shelter, Taylor recommends meeting the animal first to see if it's the right fit for you and taking into account its earliest experiences in life, its health, whether it's been socialised and whether you are in a position to train or socialise the dog.

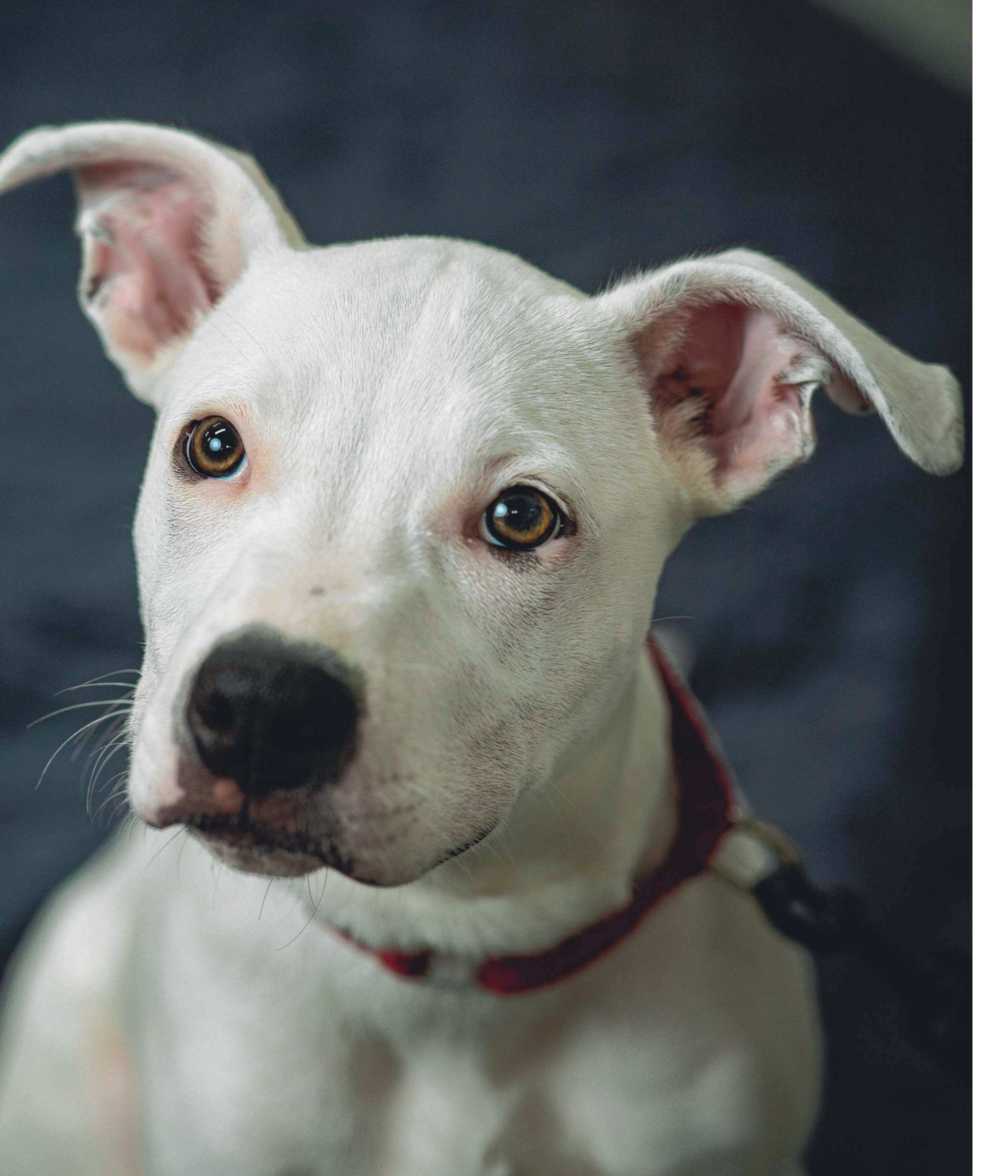
Aggy Ager, who runs Take A Lead, a training and dog behavioural business that continues to grow in the eastern suburbs, sees socialising dogs as crucial in preventing aggression.

"Socialisation means multiple exposures to lots of different stimuli. A 16-week-old puppy that has only seen one child is not socialised," she says.

Ager points to the issue of dogs acquired during Covid as the reason she and her team are learning of "more attacks on humans than before".

"Five years ago I was receiving inquiries about dog-to-dog attacks but now there are lots of inquiries for private consultations for dog-to-human aggression," she says.

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“Covid dogs have often missed out on critical factors such as socialisation.”

At her training classes, owners are taught how to socialise their animals. For example, how to ensure puppies are comfortable with children in a setting such as outside a playground.

“If a puppy has a fear of children then later on a dog that is fearful can bite. If a dog is unsure of something we call that a ‘trigger’. The trigger could be a child or a tradie or a postman,” she says.



People with a nine-months-old or one-year-old dog say to me ‘aww, but he’s still a puppy’. I’m sorry but at that age he’s like a juvenile teenager. You need to get on top of problems or they’re going to be adults with issues

Understanding what Ager calls “the 4 Fs” – freeze, flight, flirt and fight – is important. In the case of the first two, she gives the example of a dog on a groomer’s table: “The groomer will say to the owner that the dog was great on the table. Of course, it looks that way because the dog is attached to something, it can’t take flight and it is frozen in fear.

“Flirt is when the dog is unsure of a person but pretends to like them with body language such as lip licking. When that doesn’t work then the dog might default to fight or show aggression.”

At home, German-born Ager shares her life with her rescue mutt Flickr, Shadow the rescue long-necked turtle, plus Sushi and Margot the goldfish. Her business offers private training, Doggy Day School courses, and behaviour consultation for concerns such as nuisance barking, separation anxiety and aggression.

Discussing training, Ager keeps returning to the point of when to start teaching a dog. The answer: early.

“People with a nine-months-old or one-year-old dog say to me ‘aww, but he’s still a puppy’. I’m sorry but at that age he’s like a juvenile teenager. You need to get on top of problems or they’re going to be adults with issues. You can still train a dog when they’re older but it may take longer.”

Her advice is to begin the training when a puppy is under 16 weeks.

In terms of managing aggression towards strangers coming to a home, Ager, like Taylor, mentions the visiting postman example. Ager agrees on the technique of being with the dog and giving the animal a treat so it associates the postman with “good things happening and that imprints positive memories in the dog’s mind”.

Waverley Council reinforces the need for training.

“Council officers may recommend that owners consider training for their dog when specific behavioural issues are identified,” a spokesperson says. “In general, we encourage all owners to seek appropriate training for their dogs to ensure that they are safe and sociable around people and other dogs.”

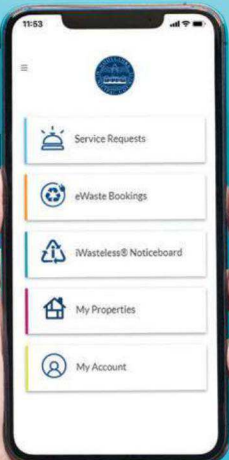
Woollahra Council says it runs “various education events which aim to advise dog owners about dog behaviour, responsible pet ownership and how to avoid conflicts between dogs and people”.

And a final word from Taylor before you’re allowed to go walkies. The word is “persistence”.

“Unfortunately, some people aren’t willing to put in the time and effort to work through the issues,” she says.






Dog trainer Aggy Ager with Milo at Rose Bay. Picture: Julian Andrews





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Pet whispering

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Those dog incident statistics include figures from the NSW Office of Local Government which reveal that from January to March this year, nine people were attacked by dogs in Hornsby, four in Ku-ring-gai, three in Lane Cove and one in Mosman.

A Mosman Council spokesperson advises that the council runs "responsible pet ownership education programs".

For the North Sydney local government area, a council spokesperson says there was a significant increase in dog ownership during the Covid period and "corresponding with this has been an increase in the number of reported incidents".

"This year there have been 53 dog attacks reported to council. This resulted in seven people attending hospital for treatment, which is a concerning increase from previous years," he says.

"Council rangers investigate all reported incidents. However, when they attend they may find the incident involved two dogs in an off-leash area being robustly playful. Unfortunately, there are some incidents where dog behaviour is concerning and further action is needed."

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Dog trainer Aggy Ager, from Take A Lead, shares a smooch with Milo. Pictures: Julian Andrews



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Animal Referral Hospital’s operations director Dr Peter Chitty of St Ives emphasises that the right training gives owners the tools to manage a dog, and animals need to be taught differently than humans.

“Training dogs and toddlers may have similarities but they are different – for example, in what pushes their buttons and how they socialise and interact,” he says. “A puppy is not a version of a child, and different breeds have different temperaments.”

Chitty adds that he got a second dog during Covid and he could see the benefits from the new animal attending the North Shore centre’s training course. For slightly older dogs there is a “manners” course.

He is adamant that he does not want to stigmatise dogs. In regards to aggressive behaviour, he believes it can be misread.

“For them to snap can be part of their behaviour just to ward off people or whatever enemies they think they have,” he says.

“They have a different communication language and we, as people, sometimes put our values on what the dogs are doing.”

And a final word from Taylor before you’re allowed to go walkies. The word is “persistence”.

“Unfortunately, some people aren’t willing to put in the time and effort to work through the issues,” she says.

Animal Referral Hospital’s Dr Peter Chitty with his border collie Addie. Picture: Julian Andrews



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