

## Living with Dogs in remote communities

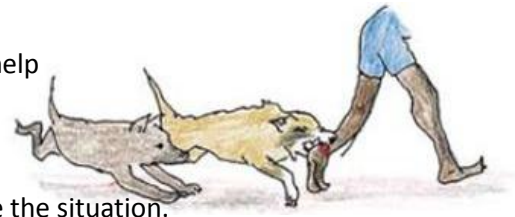
- *how to stay safe and get your job done* -

An information sheet for community workers

You are called out to an emergency job at a house one evening. You jump in the ute to attend. After finding the house, it's dark. You jump out, enter the gate, and are met with a pack of slavering attack dogs.

Do you :

- Run back to the car as fast as you can, screaming for help
- Find the nearest stick and lay into them
- Complain loudly about life's unfairness as they maul you to death
- Wonder if there might've been a better way to handle the situation.



Working on an everyday basis in remote communities, AMRRIC goes door to door specifically seeking out the dogs. Because we need to treat the dogs, and return to treat the dogs the next visit too, we have quickly learnt how to approach the situation in a way that's safest for all concerned.

### Understanding the dog's perspective

A dog's main aim in life is to guard its resources. In suburbia, this is an instinct, but in many remote communities, it is a necessity of survival. Without territory, dogs cannot access its resources such as food/rubbish, shelter, and water sources. Families will often actively or passively encourage guarding behaviour. This is because one of the main roles of companion dogs in communities is to guard families and keep them safe from threats such as other dogs, drunks, and bad spirits.

To a dog, a stranger is a threat. How they deal with this threat will depend on the dog's temperament and, most importantly, the stranger's behaviour.

*If the stranger acts like a threat, they will be treated as one.*

*If the dog comes to know the stranger as a resource,  
the dog will act to foster that resource.*

### Identifying dog temperaments through behaviour

Dogs, like people come in all sorts of temperaments. Just as there are friendly people, stubborn people, and nervous people, so are there easy-going dogs, strong-willed dogs, and high-energy dogs.



The range of dog behaviour is sometimes simplified into **dominant** or **submissive**, a bit like confident or shy in people terms, however these should not be taken to mean only dominant dogs are dangerous. A submissive dog can lash out just like a shy person can, if pushed too far out of their comfort zone. However, just like people, an individual dog's behaviour depends on many things include their upbringing, life experiences, and breeding.

Still, being able to identify these two basic types of behaviour will help you to avoid many conflicts.



### Assertive/Dominant behaviour

- Upright stance
- Ears pricked forward
- Tail up
- Straight stiff legs
- Hard staring eyes

### Submissive behaviour

- Avoiding eye contact
- ears back or flattened
- Tail down or tucked
- Crouched body stance



Both of these dogs will bite. Submissive dogs can bite if you come too close or corner them, sometimes with not much warning. Dominant dogs may bite if they think the approaching person is acting in a threatening or dominant way. They usually give a lot of **warning** first, including stiff straight body language, lifted lip, growling, barking, feint attacks, snapping or nipping. This is usually enough to make the threat go away, from the dog's point of view. If the perceived threat does not go away or submit, the level of aggression is increased until it does.

### Speaking in Dog

Dogs use their body language to communicate their intentions. Copying their body language will let them know you do not mean to be a threat.

#### Threatening human body language

- Direct eye contact
- Square stiff shoulders
- Stiff posture, arms and legs
- Fists, raised arms
- Low, deep or loud voices
- Leaning towards or over a dog
- Fast, jerky or sudden movements

#### Non-threatening human body language

- Indirect or no eye contact
- Relaxed body posture
- Facing slightly away from the dog
- Open, relaxed hands
- High pitched (but not squeaky) voices
- Leaning slightly away from a dog
- Slow, calm, relaxed movements

Using threatening body language on a stranger's dog in their territory is playing a risky game. The dog may recognise your dominance and back off, but it may also escalate the situation and provoke an attack.

### Rules of Engagement

**Never enter a dog's territory unannounced.** Though some dogs believe their territory includes the road, most will define it as the yard around their house, and leave the road as neutral territory. Call out before you get of the car. Call out at the gate. Get permission to enter, when the owners have an eye on their dogs.



**Ask to be introduced to the dogs** – preferable in daylight and when the owners are calm. Dogs pick up on the anxiety of their owners: an emergency situation is not a good time to be meeting dogs for the first time. The dogs may be shy or aggressive at first. Be still, relaxed and **let the dog approach you** and sniff you: sniffing is how dogs make sense of their world. It doesn't mean they want to bite you.



Having **food** to give may help ease the introduction. Do not expect the dog to take food from your hand: show the dog the food, then drop it near the dog. Do not throw it at the dog. A handful of dog kibble is useful here, being dry, non messy, easy to store and transport, long-lived, nutritious, and able to feed many dogs at once. The goal is just to introduce the concept to the dog that you are associated with good things. However, **do not try to go to, or pat the dog**: let the dog come to you if it is comfortable.

**Note:** Only ever feed dogs at their own properties, or they will take to following you around the community and lead to fights. Change your body language if dogs try to follow you for this reason: square up to them, look them in the eye and growl at them to go home. Do not do this if the dog is following you because they are suspicious of you **on their territory**: they will take this as a threat display.

In the suburbs, dogs have learned to respond positively to someone crouching down to their level. In communities, this may be interpreted as someone **crouching to pick up a rock**.



**If the dog shows threatening behaviour:** stay calm. Do not run: dogs have an instinct to chase things that run from them. Keep your voice and movements calm: panicky movements can be seen as threatening, or excite them. If you feel unsafe, avoid eye contact but keep them in sight, and slowly back away to neutral territory. Ask the owner to mind their dog, maybe lock him in the laundry if he's really cheeky.



**If a dog rushes at you barking:** stop. Stay calm. Avoid eye contact. Keep your body language relaxed. Quietly ask the owner to deal with their dog. If after a five seconds or so the dog does not decrease its threat display, walk away slowly to a place of safety such as your car.



**If a dog knocks you to the ground:** protect yourself. Curl your fingers inside your fists. Curl your arms around your head. Tuck your chin into your chest and curl around your belly. Stay as still as you can.



**Be aware of getting between dogs and what they are guarding:** this may be their owner, their puppies, their mate, or a food source. Some sly dogs will circle around and bite from behind: try to keep them in sight.



**Don't step over, or push past, a dog lying in a doorway.** Get the owner to call the dog away.

Be aware that **your actions influence others**. Be a positive role model: don't model violence.



**Know where the cheeky dogs live, and have both a long term plan and a short term plan for working in their territory.**

**Remember:**

Stop the cycle of violence. Do no harm.

Be a resource not a threat!