B-25 PROTOCOL 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 behaviors indicate a potentially aggressive response and knowing how not to provoke an aggressive response can help people 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 protocol focuses primarily on avoiding dog bites, but the information can also be adapted to avoiding injury by cats.

The Unknown or Unfamiliar Dog

Dogs that are unknown to individuals pose a different set of problems when considering the potential to be bitten than do familiar dogs. Most dogs that bite people in public places or in their communities are not strays—they are owned by someone and may be a good pet for them, but they are loose and free ranging. Some general information about the behavior of free-ranging dogs can help people avoid being bitten.

1. Dogs in groups may be more confident and more reactive than are single dogs.
2. Single dogs may be more wary but may still bite if cornered.
3. Dogs become bolder and more confident if close to their home turf. Unfortunately, if the dog is unknown to the person, knowing where the dog's home turf is can be difficult.
4. Dogs can view stares as threats.
5. Dogs will chase individuals who are running away from them in one of two ways: as they would chase an intruder or as they would chase prey. In both cases four-footed animals with large shearing teeth have all the advantages.
6. Children who shriek are far more liable to elicit active pursuit than those who are quiet.
7. Throwing stones, sticks, or any item or aggressively waving your arms at a dog that is aggressively pursuing you is far more likely to intensify the dog's aggression than it is to mollify the dog.
8. Young children and older people are more at risk for serious injury than are young adults. Individuals in both of these age groups are less likely to be able to successfully retreat from and fend off an attack because they may not be able to move in a coordinated manner or because they cannot anticipate the event. In fact, the mortality rate for people in these groups is much higher than for adults.
9. Although it is inappropriate and incorrect to say that certain breeds are more aggressive than others, larger breeds do more damage when they attack. The greater the size or person mismatch, the more damage that will be done. If the person attacked is a child, the chance of serious and often fatal injury increases dramatically.

With these points in mind, children should be encouraged to *not* play with unfamiliar dogs. Under no circumstances should children play with dogs that are not theirs unless they are supervised by a sentient adult. 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 toxic. 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 can be good or bad.

If a person is approached by a worrisome dog, he or she should take the following actions: (1) avoid staring at the dog; instead look at the dog obliquely out of the corner of the eye; (2) back up slowly, ensuring not to trip over anything; (3) keep arms and legs to the side—do not flail arms or make sudden bolting movements; (4) talk calmly and soothingly to the dog in a low voice if this seems to calm the dog; if the dog intensifies its growl, clearly this is not a good idea; (5) hold oneself as tall as possible; (6) move as directly as possible to a safe area—inside a building or car, behind a truck, or so on. This is the same advice that is given in wilderness situations for handling the approach of mountain lions, bears, or wolves. It is good advice.

Do not assume that because the dog stands still that you can start to run. You can only run if you can get inside a building 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 the dog is jumping at them, they should fall directly and silently to the ground, curl up in a ball, and cover their head with their hands and arms. Kids should be taught to look like armadillos when threatened by advancing, threatening dogs. This is also good advice for anyone who accidently 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 last two behaviors are the prime culprits in profound attacks that result in debility and death. Be calm; once the dog releases its grip, follow the previously mentioned steps and try to get away.

If children are grabbed by dogs, *do not struggle* with the dog for the child—the child will be further injured. Instead, look for something to throw over (a blanket) or at (a bucket of water) the dog to stop the behavior. Be calm and quiet. Encourage the child to be quiet and to 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.

Known Dogs

Known dogs, in this context, are defined as dogs that are known to have a problem aggression and may pose a risk to the people who live with them. The first step in the treatment of any canine or feline aggression is for the clients to avoid *any* circumstances that are known to be associated with aggression. This means that clients 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 is banished. Clients will feel more guilty if their dog mauls a child than if the dog spends the day in the bedroom. 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, clients should assume that if their dog has a problem aggression that they cannot 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.

Clients must protect themselves from their pet's aggression by learning to give the pet cues that encourage appropriate behavior and separate cues that tell the pet that it will be ignored by the client rather than being rewarded with interaction. This means that clients must change their own behavior to change the pet's behavior. Although it is true that the clients invariably did not cause the pet's problem, they have the responsibility for fixing it. If clients know that the dog is more aggressive when it is allowed to sleep on their bed, the dog is no longer allowed to sleep on their bed unless the clients can ask the dog to get off the bed and lie down, *and* the dog complies willingly. If not, the dog cannot be in the bedroom with them because they will always be at risk. If clients know that the dog growls every time clients groom or pet the dog, clients must avoid grooming or petting until the dog can lie down and relax for this. Use of a Gentle Leader head collar can hasten this response and render the dog safe. Under no circumstances must clients ever believe that they have to put their own safety at risk to make progress in changing their pet's behavior. This is absolutely wrong.

Clients 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 clients' behavior to take control of the situation and exhibit aggression. If clients cannot be calm, confident, and patient when working with the dog, they have a low probability of changing the dog's behavior. Clients also need to remember that *every* time that a dog or cat with a problem behavior is allowed to exhibit that behavior, it is reinforced. The pet learns how to do the behavior better with exposure, experience, and repetition. Avoidance is the key.

If clients take all precautions and the dog still threatens them, the clients should back away in the manner described previously for unknown dogs. Clients whose dogs have known aggression problems have an advantage over the situation above—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 clients give the dog a command to sit, whether part of a behavior 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 command. If this does not work, the clients should release the dog (not reward it) and slowly back away. It is far better to ignore the dog than to struggle to "win" or "dominate" the dog. Clients invariably succeed at doing neither but instead teach the dog more about the clients' fears and the extent to which the dog can manipulate them. Even if the clients must repeatedly avoid the dog, this is preferable to physically contesting the dog. If clients are consistent, the dog will ultimately approach and be willing to exhibit deferential behaviors in exchange for the clients' requests. In extreme cases this can take days. It sounds hard-hearted, but the dog will not starve to death. However, in these extreme cases, if clients are overly sympathetic for the dog, the dog will manipulate them and the behavior modification process will backslide. If the dog continues to threaten the clients and avoidance does not elicit deference, the clients should orchestrate 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 clients can begin the modification process again. Keep the dog behind a barrier for as long as is necessary for the dog to calm down. Clients 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, clients may wish to question their success in reliably changing this behavior into a safe and loving one).

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

Client anger and a sense of disappointment and betrayal are normal, but dogs with problem aggressions cannot respond rationally to those feelings. Clients should remove themselves from the situation as quickly as possible. Leave the dog alone to be quiet. Clients should not punish the dog physically, no matter how angry or hurt they are—this will only make matters worse. The client 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 client is either too fearful or too physically or emotionally injured to do this or no longer wants to work with the dog after such an event, the prognosis is poor. Clients should never feel forced to work with a dog that terrifies or endangers them. They may feel sad about their decision to euthanize the dog (or in some cases place it in another home, if this is possible), but there is no reason to feel guilty if the clients behaved as previously mentioned. Clients 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 behaviors.