

A Dog's Outing to the Supermarket

On witnessing an incident outside a leading supermarket I wondered what I could do to give people an awareness of just what it might be like from the dog's point of view. Also, it is an important message to put across, due to the increasing number of dog bite stories hitting the news headlines in recent times. With some awareness and education into dog communication, many incidents could be defused quite easily and calmly.

How the events unfolded

It was late morning on a busy Saturday at the supermarket. A Jack Russell was tied to a bench. The bench is situated right by the entrance, with a pillar directly in front of it. The area is awkward to navigate past others, while pushing a trolley and trying to avoid collisions with oncoming customers.

Most weeks there are also people collecting money for charities in the same area. It is a very 'compact and bijoux' space, regularly causing a point of frustration for customers, especially considering the modern day climate with everyone pushed for time and space. The congestion is made worse by a couple of litter bins, a variety of pillars, trolley storage and sometimes an advertising board. As well as this chaos outside the shop, immediately inside are customers with trolleys trying to access the 'self scanning' guns. This adds to the congestion and confusion outside when self-scan patrons block the area with their trolleys. There's no other entrance.

The lack of space makes it difficult for people to pass comfortably and it is always awkward to get in and out of the shop. On this particular Saturday the small Jack Russell had been left tied to the end of the bench, while her owner went into do his shopping. What I saw was a terrified dog and a potentially dangerous situation. The dog was barking at anyone who came close to her and there was a continual stream of people passing close by. I later found out the dog had been there for at least twenty minutes, maybe more. Some people walked so close to the dog, almost as though they hadn't seen or heard a dog barking at them, while others walked head on to the cornered dog, as they

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repeatedly tried to reach out a hand, in an attempt to console it. The dog became more and more agitated and noticeably more reactive with each encounter.



People wheel trolleys extremely close to the bench, regardless of there being a dog there.

The dog was situated at the end of the bench close to the large white pillar shown in the photograph. She was secured to the bench by a short lead of less than a metre. A person was situated further along the bench in close proximity to the dog. At the end of the bench, so close to the dog that I thought they owned her, stood a man, looking on while his toddler son played at climbing on and off the bench, almost falling on top of the dog at times. The child was towering over the dog as he cavorted on the bench.

A fearful animal without a 'get out clause' is a ticking time bomb

The father, with all good intentions, tried to befriend the dog by bending over her, stretching out his hand (as is very common), which made the dog's reactivity to them worse. She was now growling and barking, almost snapping. From the top of the bench the child followed his father's lead in trying to befriend the dog. By viewing the scenario as it unfolded, my heart began to beat faster because I recognized the dog's anxiety and distress which the father and son seemed oblivious

to. The poor dog was so distraught, barking more and more. I could see she was physically trying to get away, her body writhing against the bench and away from the boy. A fearful animal without a 'get out clause' is a ticking time bomb.

All choices have been taken away and to that animal who doesn't understand our language, survival has to be number one on their agenda. I guess there are many situations similar to this one, where the result has been a child ending up hospitalised and the dog being euthanized. To a human adult it would look as though the dog hadn't been provoked; in fact it had been to a great extent. Imagine yourself in the dog's position. How would you feel?

The whole thing sickened me. If I didn't try to do something soon, this happy child could so easily, within a split second, end up as another victim of a savage attack by an out of control dog and the dog could so easily become yet another casualty of the Dangerous Dogs Act and be placed on Death Row.

I walked over to where the father stood, trying to put my body (with back to the dog) in front of the dog and child as I spoke to the father. This was not possible as the child was too close. I

asked the father if the dog belonged to him. He told me that she did not. I then began to explain that the dog was feeling very frightened at the close proximity of him and the child, and asked them to be so kind as to move. The father took offence at first (a strange woman telling a man what to do!) but I went on to explain that the dog didn't understand what was going on and was unable to get away from the situation. Having explained that I wasn't blaming him or his son for anything but that the dog could easily bite his son he reluctantly took his son and moved away.

I positioned myself close to the dog, close enough without being barked or growled at. Even though there wasn't much space between the dog and myself, people still tried to access the entrance by walking between us. I asked people if they would walk around the pillar the other way to give the dog some space. As the dog became used to me just standing there I was able to gradually get closer (still with my back to her), closing the gap and preventing others from walking between us. When she became less reactive I decided to ask for help.

Having spoken to a few passers-by, they informed me that the dog had been barking for some twenty minutes. I was even told of one dog that had been dumped there the week before. As I needed to get home and wasn't sure if the

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dog had indeed been dumped I decided to ask for some assistance in locating the owner. The staff were most helpful and eventually put out an announcement over the tannoy system, but during the time I had sought help the dog was barking so much that she was gathering a crowd.

I resumed my position, between the dog and the pillar, preventing lone people and those with trolleys walking too close. My partner positioned himself between the entrance and the other side of the pillar and the woman on the bench acted as a barrier, preventing others from sitting on the bench. I had asked the elderly woman on the bench to move a little further away from the dog and to ignore her, explaining why. She was a good influence on the dog as she moved slowly and was calm. Dogs react better when people slow down and are calm; we do too. The effect was to give the dog more space and avoid eye contact, as this is especially threatening to a dog that is already fearful.

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After ten more minutes or so the dog's body language changed dramatically; softening, visually melting. I knew instinctively before turning round, that the approaching man was her owner. He untied her lead and she immediately began to chew and tug on it - a more extreme state of stress, in this case used as a stress reliever. She could have easily reacted the same way toward the child. I informed the owner that his dog had been most distressed at being tied up and that she had been barking for a long time. He said that she always

barked when left. I said 'then she's clearly not happy and she might be better off left at home'. I tried to ask what her behaviour was like at home. He told me she liked going to the shops and with that he walked off! I just hope the incident gave him a chance to think about whether his dog was truly happy at being left outside the shop.

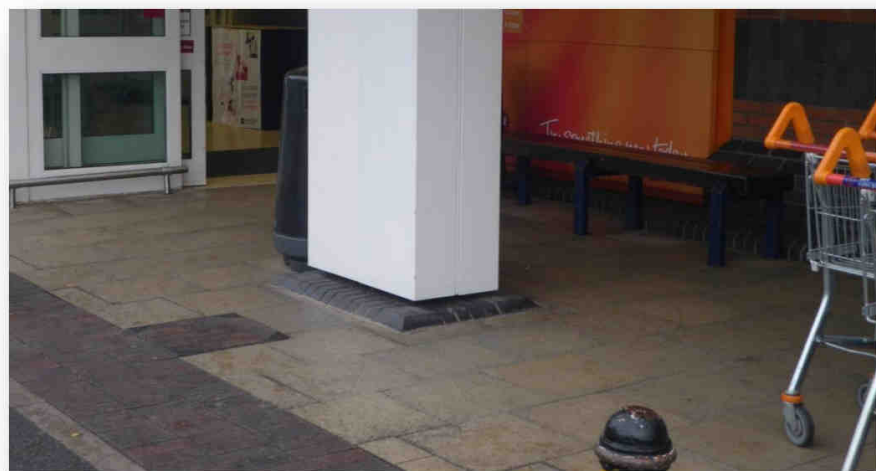
On speaking with the staff they enlightened me to the fact that the owner often brought his dog but usually it is tied up on the other side of the entrance where there is far more space and the area isn't as congested. She still barks, however, but nothing like as much as she had done on this Saturday. The staff in the store had been alerted by several people reporting the dog outside barking.

I would like to make it clear that at no point I had any intention to make contact with the dog; my aim was simply to protect her and help her through the difficulties she was struggling with, having her communication ignored by everyone. I understand that some individuals were well meaning in their behaviour to reach out hands and offer words of comfort and support. By trying to help in this way the people were unwittingly making the situation worse for the dog. It often happens that when a dog barks, human attention is drawn to the dog. Dogs often bark as a warning to 'stay away' or they want something. Some are right in that they recognize the distress in the dog but their approach is often NOT what the dog wants but quite the opposite. It is a human need to touch animals, even those we don't know, and scared animals seldom welcome such attention; especially when they have no escape route.

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What I did was to stand with my back to the dog at all times and made no attempt to befriend the dog. She was in such a state and was having bad experience after bad experience with people that she'd gone beyond that point. With my back toward her I was not as much of a threat, however the close proximity, but the longer I stood there the closer I was able to get and the less reactive she became. If I had tried to touch her I would have destroyed the trust I was building up. I would always allow a dog a choice to approach. She did calm down enough to sniff the back of my legs briefly, which showed me her anxiety levels were reducing slightly. A dog that is able to sniff is a dog that is able to think.

The space between the white pillar and the bench, the trolley storage area and the amount of space available to wheel trolleys between the two. The dog was tied to the seated area of the bench at the far end close to the legs of the bench and the trolley storage area.



Through the eyes of the dog

Looking at things from a dog's perspective makes it clear why this was a traumatic and potentially dangerous situation:

1. The dog is tied up. This immediately puts any dog into a vulnerable position, as they have no escape route. How might we feel if unable to escape when faced with dogs (or any another species) coming from all directions?
2. Her owner walks away leaving her for a length of time. Dogs like company, especially when they feel insecure. The dog was insecure due to the set of circumstances she was left in. Her owner left her and she had no escape route. She became more anxious the longer her owner was away.
3. The limited space gave the dog fewer options. She was unable to control what was happening, unable to keep people coming toward her, with trolleys too.
4. The dog's communication was ignored. In fact by barking the poor dog drew more unwanted attention that she didn't need. People bending over the dog, walking up to her head on, reaching out their hands only fuelled her reactive state. For a dog, all of these are very rude and threatening forms of communication. If another dog tried these approaches it would be met with conflict.
5. Unpredictable behaviour from a child with whom she may not have been socialised. She may not have been accustomed to the way in which children move, act or sound. They can be annoying to us at times due to their high pitched screeches, cries, their flailing arms and legs that jerk around and their clumsiness. Many animals will shy away from children if given the chance.
6. People walking head on toward the dog. For a dog, head on approaches are threatening and can be dangerous. Dogs naturally curve around one another when they meet; they give each other space. The area the dog was left in was heavily populated, giving the people little or no space. Therefore people's anxiety levels were also raised.

What could have been done to avoid this extremely stressful experience?

The most straightforward answer is to leave the dog at home, though this may not be the right thing for all dogs. Bringing a dog to the supermarket isn't something I would advocate for any dog, with or without the owner being with her. It's a chore humans perform and there are usually better and safer options for the dog. This would depend on the dog's behaviour at home. If the dog were more distressed at home then that would not be the right thing for them. From the greeting the man received from the dog I had no reason to suspect there was a separation issue. The dog greeted the owner in a calm way, not too excitable or overly pleased to see him, just a nice calm, gentle greeting.

Because of the demands on our time and sometimes our laziness as well as problem solving abilities, we like to and tend to multi-task to enable us to achieve more in a day. So numerous tasks can be performed in one outing

such as walking the dog to school and back with the children, nipping into the shops on the way home, leaving the dog tied up outside the shop. The dog is not a commodity and deserves to have time set aside for her. If this is not possible then why have a dog? Maybe give the dog a slightly shorter walk on the day you go shopping if time is an issue for you. If your dog is reactive and this is not possible then there is already a behaviour issue and maybe some behavioural advice is needed.

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The good news is that the supermarket have now moved the bench away from the entrance, positioning it about eighty yards away, in a much quieter place. I have no idea whether this repositioning was in response to the complaints they received from customers during this incident. Hopefully now if the owner persists in bringing his dog shopping, at least she will be in a more peaceful, less threatening place.