

# Inadequate Understanding of Dogs' Body Language Puts Kids at Risk

**Emily D. Levine, DVM, DACVB**

*Animal Behavior Clinic of Animal Emergency & Referral Associates  
Fairfield, New Jersey*

## In the Literature

Demirbas YS, Ozturk H, Emre B, Kockaya M, Ozvardar T, Scott A. Adults' ability to interpret canine body language during a dog-child interaction. *Anthrozoös*. 2016;29(4):581-596.

## FROM THE PAGE ...

There are approximately 4.5 million dog bites annually, and children are at high risk for bites.<sup>1</sup> In children, most bites wounds are to their face, head, and neck. More needs to be done to prevent dog bites to kids.<sup>2,3</sup>

This study looked at how adults interpreted a dog's behavior and emotional state while interacting with a young child. Three videos of dog-child interactions were shown to 71 adults, who were asked questions about what they perceived to be the dog's emotional state and response to the child. The interactions between the dogs and children were common scenarios that happen in everyday life. The videos were first observed by behavior experts, and all experts agreed the dogs in the videos were exhibiting fearful or anxious behaviors.

More than 65% of adults in the study reported the dogs to be confident or relaxed. Watching the tail was the number one behavior posture observed by the study participants; all assumed a wagging tail related to a positive emotional state. If adults perceive dogs as relaxed or confident when the dog is actually anxious or fearful, the adult is not educated enough to safeguard the child from a bite. It is interesting to note that experience with dogs did not seem to improve a person's ability to correctly identify dogs' emotional states.

## ... TO YOUR PATIENTS

Key pearls to put into practice:

- 1** Clients must be advised that supervision is ineffective if they do not understand when intervention is necessary based on a dog's subtle body language cues.
- 2** Every clinic room should have a poster of dog body language (the author uses posters made by Sophia Yin [<https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/dog-bite-prevention-week-poster-on-the-body-language-of-fear-and-aggression/>]).
- 3** All parents of young children and expectant parents should be given a copy of the dog aggression ladder (<http://www.thebluedog.org/en/dog-behaviour/behaviour-problems/why-does-my-dog/ladder-of-aggression>) at appointments and a handout of clinical signs of a fearful anxious dog.
- 4** Every client must be advised that a wagging tail does not mean a dog is happy.

## References

1. Preventing Dog Bites. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <https://www.cdc.gov/features/dog-bite-prevention/index.html>. Updated May 18, 2015. Accessed February 20, 2017.
2. Ozanne-Smith J, Ashby K, Stathakis VZ. Dog bite and injury prevention—analysis, critical review, and research agenda. *Inj Prev*. 2001;7(4):321-326.
3. Schalamon J, Ainoedhofer H, Singer G, et al. Analysis of dog bites in children who are younger than 17 years. *Pediatrics*. 2006; 117(3):e374-e379.

## Suggested Reading

- Lakestani NN, Donaldson M, Waran N. Interpretation of dog behavior by children and young adults. *Anthrozoös*. 2014;27(1):65-80.
- Overall KL, Love M. Dog bites to humans—demography, epidemiology, injury, and risk. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2001;218(12):1923-1934.
- Meints K, de Keuster T. Brief report: Don't kiss a sleeping dog: the first assessment of "the blue dog" bite prevention program. *J Pediatr Psychol*. 2009;34(10):1084-1090.