

Risk to small children from family dog often underestimated

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People trust their own dog and exclude the possibility of a bite incident. Credit: Christian Damböck

Dog bites suffered by young children are often inflicted by the family dog. Such incidents frequently occur despite the presence of an adult.

Even benign behaviours on the part of children, such as hugging the dog, can trigger an aggressive response from the animal. A survey of dog owners conducted by researchers from the Institute of Animal Husbandry and Animal Welfare at Vetmeduni Vienna shows that people underestimate risky situations involving the family dog. A better understanding of the dog's needs and simple measures such as child-free resting and feeding places for the dogs can significantly reduce the risk of dog bites. The analysis of the survey was published in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*.

Children love petting dogs, playing with them and crawling after them. They especially love to hug or cuddle the family dog. Unwanted close contact sometimes causes dogs to feel harassed and they respond by snapping at the child. Many cases of dog bites involving small children happen in [everyday life](#) as the result of an apparently friendly interaction on the part of the child.

Bite incidents often occur despite supervision

"Dog owners should recognize situations in which their dog may feel harassed and they should intervene in time. Nevertheless, many bite incidents occur right in front of the adults' eyes," explains study director Christine Arhant from the Institute of Animal Husbandry and Animal Protection at Vetmeduni Vienna. Her team is investigating why bite incidents involving the family dog are so common even under adult supervision. The group looked at the results of an [online survey](#) in order to provide the first analysis of parental attitudes regarding the supervision of child-dog interactions.

"Most of the respondents are aware of the general risk of [dog bites](#)," says Arhant. The majority of the participants, however, underestimated the risk involving smaller dogs. Asked to look at pictures of child-dog interactions, the respondents rated interactions with unfamiliar dogs as

inherently riskier than with the family dog.

Trust put ahead of attentiveness

Situations involving unfamiliar dogs, even with relatively lower risk, were rated as potentially dangerous. When it comes to the family dog, however, nearly all situations were rated as harmless with no need for intervention. Only the situation of a child cuddling with the dog in the dog's bed was rated as a potential risk. Around 50 percent of respondents allow the child to play or cuddle with the dog as much as they want. The same number leaves the child and dog unsupervised.

"The healthy distrust of unfamiliar dogs does not appear to exist toward the family dog," Arhant concludes. "People trust their own dog and exclude the possibility of a bite incident." This not only reduces attentiveness, but dog owners also assume that the family dog is more tolerant and more patient than other [dogs](#). "But people need to respect their dog's need for rest and a place of its own," Arhant says.

Attention should be paid to the dog's need for space

The online survey shows that [dog owners](#) provide for their dog's basic needs, such as walks or separate resting and feeding places. But most respondents appear not to know that a dog needs undisturbed resting periods away from [small children](#). Only a few participants said they made sure that the resting and feeding place for the family dog was out of the children's reach. "Spatial separation means adults do not always have to be attentive to the child-dog interaction. The child is safe and the dog has the chance to relax undisturbed," the study director explains.

Awareness alone is not enough

The lack of adequate resting areas and resting periods for the dog may create situations in everyday life that could lead to a bite incident. Dog owners must therefore be instructed in proper child-dog supervision. Important factors include attentive observation, guidance of the child's interactions with the dog and separating the dog from the child if necessary.

Children unable to recognize threat

Small children are not yet capable of understanding that a dog does not always want to be touched and followed everywhere it goes. If the dog feels harassed by the child or restricted in its freedom, it will communicate this through body language. Clear signs include body tension, growling, frequent licking of the snout and yawning. Small children have difficulties interpreting this behaviour. Even a growling dog or one baring its teeth is often described by children as smiling.

More information: Christine Arhant et al, Attitudes of caregivers to supervision of child–family dog interactions in children up to 6 years—An exploratory study, *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jveb.2016.06.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2016.06.007)

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