

New research reveals links between dog attacks and misunderstanding of dog behavior

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New research from Edge Hill University shows that dog owners often misinterpret dog behavior which could contribute to the rise in dog attacks and calls for a change in legislation.

Professor Claire Parkinson led a team that surveyed 1,535 people, focusing on their perceptions of dangerous dogs, bite risk, and [information sources](#) on dogs.

Most respondents incorrectly believed that a dog would actively avoid biting a child. They also struggled to identify dog body language, failed to recognize prohibited [dog breeds](#), and believed that their own dogs were better behaved than dogs in general.

Based on her findings, Professor Parkinson is calling on the Government to overturn outdated breed-based legislation and shift the focus onto owners. She proposes reintroducing licenses, launching a public information campaign, and establishing easily accessible, community-led dog training sessions for low-income dog owners.

Professor Parkinson, co-director of Edge Hill's Center for Human Animal Studies (CfHAS), said, "Dog bites are a growing public health issue, and my research sheds light on why. The findings clearly demonstrate a lack of understanding of dog body language."

"Dogs seldom attack without warning. People may hold a misguided anthropomorphic view of their own and other dogs, resulting in inadequate training and misinterpretation of behavior which can increase the risk of a dog bite occurring."

This research follows a 34% increase in recorded dog attacks by police in England and Wales over the past five years. The surge in attacks has become a significant public health concern, with estimated direct health costs to the NHS reaching £71 million in 2017/2018.

Despite respondents' experience with dogs, interpretations of canine body language varied, other than obvious behaviors like bared teeth. Compounding the issue, participants were broadly confident in their ability to interpret canine communication.

Moreover, respondents displayed diverse responses to dog behavior, including concerning instances where a significant number chose responses that could escalate a dangerous situation.

Professor Parkinson cautioned owners, "One alarming finding was that many dog-owning respondents couldn't discern a dog's communication cues, and even worse, some said they would react by attempting to cuddle or stroke a worried dog, increasing the risk of being bitten. Owners need to gain a better understanding of how to react to a dog's behavior."

In the UK, the majority of dog bites occur in the victim's home and involve a familiar dog. This aligns with the fact 44% of respondents believed that "dogs try to be gentle and avoid biting children," and almost half agreed that "parents are almost always absent when a dog bites a small child," while only 28% correctly recognized it as false.

Professor Parkinson added, "The data highlights people's inclination to perceive dogs as inherently gentle or humanized. Owners may not recognize when a dog is trying to communicate their stress or discomfort. It is particularly important that children are taught how to interact appropriately with dogs."

A possible explanation for the lack of dog knowledge is that there is a lack of consistent clear information. Nearly half of all respondents considered television programs about dog behavior the best source of information. One third stated they follow the advice of celebrity dog trainers, though popular dog behavior programs endorse a range of

training methods, including discredited alpha or dominance theories.

"An important finding is that almost two thirds of respondents believe there should be more public information regarding the risk posed by dangerous dogs," Professor Parkinson added. "Without more support for dog owners, dogs will lack training, and owners will continue to misunderstand dog behavior.

"There needs to be a shift away from the focus on breed bans to education and awareness-raising. A [public information](#) campaign and improved access to dog training would definitely help to address some of the current issues."

Of the sample size surveyed, 89% were current [dog owners](#), 87% claimed dogs liked them and that they were good with dogs and 20% had experience with so-called bull breeds.

More information: Paper: [Public Perceptions of Dangerous Dogs and Dog Risk](#)

Provided by Edge Hill University

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