

Visiting Child is Afraid of Dogs

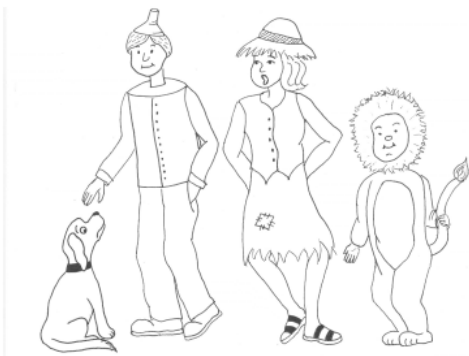
Kevin came over to play today. For the past two hours, he and my 6-year-old son Brandon have been running through the house playing hide and seek. They've gone in every room at least twice, have repeatedly hollered up and down the stairs, and have even attempted to sneak up behind me a few times, but their giggling always gives them away. The boys are having a wonderful visit.

This whole time, my dog, Gordo, has been in his crate.

Gordo is a great dog with kids. In fact, just this morning, he and I visited three preschool classes to present dog-safety workshops where he gracefully allowed thirty-six 3- and 4-year-olds to pet him only a few hours ago. Because I am a dog trainer, we visit schools regularly as a community service.

So why is he napping in his crate while one 6-year-old visitor is here? Well, there are two reasons. First, Kevin told me that he's nervous around dogs, "especially big dogs who will bite me." Hmm, Gordo may be big, but he's definitely not a biter. And second, I have work to do while the boys are playing.

Whenever a child visits our home, I actively supervise every interaction between the dog and the kids (mine too). Kids are exciting and exhausting. All parents know that, but we often forget that our dogs see kids that way too. Dogs become accustomed to the antics of "their" kids, but other children can be very hard for them to read.



I find a Wizard of Oz analogy helpful when I'm trying to explain to people how human body language affects dogs. Men are like the tin man; they stand up straight and approach directly. They frequently reach right for the dog's face. Many dogs are intimidated by this frontal advance.

Women are like the scarecrow. We soften our body language by crouching down to make ourselves smaller and less intimidating, and we frequently beckon dogs to approach us, rather than move into their space.

Children are the cowardly lion, and they can be the most frightening of all. They reach forward to pet a dog, then jerk their hand back because they're unsure. Over and over. The dog, watching a hand volley back and forth over his head, often interprets this as teasing. "Can you get me? Here I am! Ha, ha, now I'm gone."

None of these behavioral styles cause aggression in dogs, but if a dog is already uncomfortable and you act like the tin man or the cowardly lion, you are only making things worse.

Each year, approximately 2.8 million children are bitten by a dog; boys receive two-thirds of these bites. These are our children! Parents play a huge role in keeping children safe around dogs. We can



do better! The most important thing we as parents can do is learn a little about dogs and their body language. Once we understand what a dog is telling us, we'll be much better equipped to help our dogs and kids understand one another.

Dogs communicate almost entirely through body language. They are very adept at reading nonverbal messages from other dogs and from their human families. Unfortunately we often misunderstand or simply don't notice what our dogs are trying to tell us. In my dog-training classes, I frequently stop the class to narrate the messages various dogs are sending with their body language.

There is a set of mannerisms—called calming signals—dogs display when they are stressed. These serve two purposes: they are an attempt at self-soothing, akin to thumb sucking, as well as a message to others that the dog would like the situation to defuse.

- **Lip licking**—When a dog is a little anxious, he will often quickly stick out his tongue and lick his lips. It's usually just a fast, little flick. Watch your dog; this is one of the most common signals I see.
- **Yawning**—This is often mistaken for contentment. The dog is surrounded by kids, and he lets out a big yawn. Isn't that sweet? Nope, it's a sign that he's in a little over his head and would appreciate your help.
- **Turning face away**—Often owners think a dog turning away from them is "blowing them off" and they intensify their demands on him, which is exactly what the dog was trying to avoid.
- **Shaking off**—We've all seen dogs shake off when they are wet, but this happens at other times too. I liken it to a reset button on a video game. Time to shake off and start over. It will happen right after something makes the dog uncomfortable, usually as he's walking away.
- **Freezing**—Watch out! Freezing is one step beyond a calming signal; it's often a last-ditch attempt to tell you to back off. Dogs typically freeze right before they snap or bite. That may sound obvious, but one of the scariest things I ever saw was when an owner told me that, "Lucy loves to have kids hug her. Look how still she is." It was a heart-stopping moment for me. Lucy, thank goodness, did not bite, but she was definitely not enjoying the experience.

Most of the time when kids come over, they know Gordo and are comfortable with him. So I let the kids visit with him for a few minutes when they arrive, and then I keep Gordo with me while the kids play. Kevin is a new friend and he's afraid of big dogs, so today, I chose to let the boys play alone. Gordo got a nap, and I got much more done than if I'd spent the time watching Kevin, Brandon, and Gordo interact.

Now that it is nearly time for Kevin to go home, I ask him again if he'd like to meet Gordo. He agrees on the condition that Gordo won't jump on him. I assure him that Gordo will not and offer Kevin a handful of cheerios. As I unzip the mesh crate and Gordo comes wiggling out to meet a new friend, I whisper to Kevin for him to toss a few cheerios on the floor. This helps Gordo seem less intimidating because the dog is far more focused on the floor than he is on Kevin.



As Kevin becomes more comfortable, I tell him that Gordo knows a few tricks and suggest that he try telling Gordo to sit and to spin. Kevin's face lights up as he watches Gordo listen to him—a 6-year-old visitor! That's very empowering. Knowing that you have some control over a situation always helps alleviate fear.

It's time for us take Kevin home, so I tell the boys to grab their jackets. As we walk out the door, Kevin looks over his shoulder and says, "Bye, Gordo. I'll see you next time."

Now that's a successful visit!