Dog bites research: UAB testing software to teach kids, dogs to interact safely

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Psychologists at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) are testing a software program designed to teach children to interact safely with dogs.

Each year as many as 4.5 million Americans are bitten by dogs. Nearly one in five — about 885,000 people — suffer injuries severe enough to require medical attention, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among children, the rate of dog-bite related injuries is highest for those ages 5-9.

"Dogs are wonderful companions that bring great happiness to millions of children and their families," says UAB psychologist David Schwebel, Ph.D., director of the UAB Youth Safety Lab. Schwebel is conducting the study along with UAB graduate student Aaron Davis, the study's principal investigator.

"But we must remember that dogs are animals, and that they can have the potential to bite young children who don't realize it is dangerous to reach for dogs in the face or to try to play with dogs that are sleeping or eating," Schwebel says.

Children in the study and their parents will be given The Blue Dog software program created by The Blue Dog Trust in the United Kingdom. The program presents a series of games that instruct children to avoid behaviors that can aggravate a dog such as pulling its tail or ears or making direct eye contact.

UAB researchers then will observe the children's behaviors with a live dog to evaluate the program's effectiveness by comparing pre- and post-test scores.

One hundred children ages 3-6 from the Birmingham area are needed for the trial study at UAB. All children in the study must have at least one dog in the home. All of the dogs used in the UAB study are pet-therapy dogs registered with The Delta Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health through service and therapy animals.

"If this computer game successfully teaches young children to interact safely with their pet dogs," said Schwebel, "it could have enormous impact on reducing accidental bites from pet dogs."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham