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Domestic dog understanding of containment and occlusion events

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Abstract

Intuitive physical concepts help humans navigate the world. One such concept, object containment, has been studied extensively in infants and nonhuman primates. Evidence indicates objects hidden inside of containers are more difficult to find than covered or occluded objects, possibly due to the prerequisite understanding that containers are hollow. Dogs encounter containers in daily life, and canine studies commonly require subjects to locate hidden treats. The present research provides the first test of the hypothesis that dogs, like primates, find it harder to make inferences about containment compared to other hiding events. To address this hypothesis, across 24 trials dogs (N=90) searched between 2 possible locations, one of which concealed a treat. They watched 3 different methods of hiding: i) inside containers, ii) behind containers, and iii) under containers. As predicted, dogs were less likely to locate treats inside containers. Results will be discussed in a comparative context.