



McMillan Animal Behavior

Body language for shelter workers

There are many books, webinars and videos dedicated to dog body language, and it is vital that shelter workers continue learning how to read dogs well, as this is probably the best way to increase safety, for both humans and dogs. It is also important that people who work with these dogs learn how to change their human body language in response to the dogs, in order to defuse tensions.

Many people tend to focus on the dog's tail, but it's far more important to start by looking at the end that might bite, not the end that wags. It is also very helpful to look at the overall picture the dog is presenting: is the body angled forward or back? Are they trying to make themselves larger or smaller? In some cases, similar-looking body language can mean more than one thing, so looking at all the body parts and postures in context will give you the clearest picture of what the dog is feeling, and how best to handle them.

Body tension and position

When you're first deciding how to handle a shelter dog, first consider where the dog's body tension is on the "loose vs stiff" spectrum. It can be helpful to consider where the dog might fall on a scale from 1 (totally loose and floppy) to 10 (rigid muscles, completely stiff)

A dog on the loose, relaxed, affiliative end of the spectrum will generally have soft, squinty eyes, with open mouth, ears back, tail low and wagging softly, and no visible body tension. His body will be soft and his spine may be curved. In general, a friendly or playful dog's elbows will bend as the dog takes excited little steps in place, or throws himself into a full play bow, with elbows touching the ground and loosely wagging tail, parallel to the spine or higher.



A dog who is fearful will have generally have lowered, tense body posture. He may be creeping along the ground or attempting to retreat, with his head lowered and tail tucked. His weight will usually be back, shifted away from whatever is frightening him.



Photo: Alyssa Ginez

A dog on the stiff end of the spectrum will generally have hard, round eyes, and tension wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. He'll have a straight spine, stiff legs, hardened muscles, and his tail may be high, stiff and unmoving, or vibrating only a little at the tip. The mouth will generally be closed and the lip may be short. A dog who is offensively aggressive will generally have high, forward, tense body posture, with hackles raised, and tail high.



Photo: offensive pucker, Maggi Burt

Many snaps and bites happens because people just didn't see some of the more subtle warning signs. A freeze, to the uneducated eye,, looks like a dog doing "nothing." A dog who is freezing will usually have a stiff, tense body and may have hackles up, head lowered and hard eyes.

Eyes

If you only have time to look at one body part, look closely at the dog's eyes. This doesn't mean you should loom over and stare directly at an unknown dog; you can get a lot of this information out of the corner of your eye. (A direct stare can be taken as a threat in dog body language.)

Pay close attention to the shape of the dog's eye. A squinty or almond-shaped eye usually belongs to an affiliative, calm, or friendly dog. A very round, or hard eye, sometimes with the pupil fully dilated, is usually seen on a fearful, aroused, or potentially aggressive dog. Watch for wrinkles above the eye or beside the mouth, caused by facial tension. Often as a dog becomes more tense or fearful, you'll see more of the whites around the edges, sometimes called a "whale eye".



*Whale eye with tongue flick
photo: Brett Currie*

Ears

A naturally prick-eared dog has expressive ears that can rotate from all the way forward to all the way back, and everywhere in between. Floppy ears can be more difficult to read, but the base of the ears will tell you whether they're back, forward, or rotated.

A dog with ears forward is likely alerting to something in front of him. Looking at the rest of the body can help you determine whether the dog is alerting in a friendly, sociable way or if he is considering lunging or snapping.



Alert ears, with soft eye and body

A dog with ears fully back may be in a fearful or appeasing mood. If the ears are off to the side in “airplane” position, the dog may just be relaxed or playful, or they may be conflicted. Ears all the way back and rotated outward so they’re almost touching are often a flirtatious signal, or an invitation to play.



Fearful ears – Keegan Spera

Mouth

If the dog’s lip is long, with wrinkles or tension beside it, the dog may be fearful or worried. As the mouth shortens, you may start seeing the whisker beds raise as the whiskers start pointing forward, and there may be wrinkles above the nose.



Stress panting, long lip

These can be precursors to a snap or bite. Both fearful and offensively aggressive dogs can bite, but it’s good to know which emotion you’re dealing with. Once the dog’s lips are retracted into a snarl and teeth are showing, everyone knows a bite may come next. Learning the more subtle precursors to aggressive behavior can help us change our handling so the dog doesn’t have to escalate to a bite.



Snarl – Jena Marie Olio

It is also important to pay attention to the dog's breathing. Pay close attention when you see a dog panting, and then in response to something in the environment, he closes his mouth - this could be a precursor to a fearful or aggressive response, especially if it's accompanied by a freeze, or hackles. If the tongue is wide and spatulate as the dog pants quickly, he is likely in psychological or physiological (usually heat) stress.



Stress pant – spatulate tongue

Coat

A dog with the hackles raised on his back (piloerection) is in a state of physiological arousal. This might be a fearful or offensive response to a perceived threat, but it can also be a response to seeing prey.



Piloerection

Tail

When assessing how a dog might be feeling, first look at the tail height in comparison to what's normal for the dog (A pug's normal is very different from a whippet's normal). Is the base of the tail high, at spine level, low, or tucked? A wagging tail indicates arousal and a willingness to interact – this might be in a friendly or unfriendly way; the rest of the dog's body language will help you differentiate.



Tucked tail - Erin Saywell

A dog who is friendly and affiliative will generally have a neutral to low tail height, and the tail will be wagging in wide sweeps, perhaps even touching the dog's body on either side as he wags. The tail may rotate in circles or figure eights as the dog displays loose, affiliative body language.

A dog who is fearful might have his tail tucked between his legs, it may even be pressed right up against his belly. It may be totally still or it may be wagging very slightly.

A dog who is offensively aggressive will generally have his tail arched high over his back. It may wag quickly, or it may almost vibrate, just at the tip. Again, look at the rest of the dog's body language to determine the dog's willingness to engage or bite.



Alert – tail high

Displacement or stress signals

There are subtle signs dogs may give that are important to recognize as displacement, cutoff or stress signals. If you see these things, maybe back off or change your handling to make the dog more comfortable. Some of these signs are:

- Nose lick or tongue flick
- Blinking
- Yawning
- Looking away deliberately
- Sitting with back to you
- Sniffing the ground out of context
- Play bow or stretch
- Lying down

It is important to look at all of these behaviors together, and take into account the context in which you're seeing them. This is by no means an exhaustive summary of every snippet of dog body language – keep watching and learning, and you'll be able to handle the dogs in your care effectively and humanely.

Additional body language resources:

Sarah Kalnajs "The Language of Dogs" DVD

Brenda Aloff, "Dog Body Language" book

Zoom Room youtube channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00_9JPltXHI

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY8NpMm2OVA>

ASPCA Pro Canine and feline communication series

Lili Chin body language posters

DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier



ALERT



SUSPICIOUS



ANXIOUS



THREATENED



ANGRY



"PEACE!"
look away/head turn



STRESSED
yawn



STRESSED
nose lick



"PEACE!"
sniff ground



"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away



"NEED SPACE"
whale eye



STALKING



STRESSED
scratching



STRESS RELEASE
shake off



RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes



"RESPECT!"
offer his back



FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body



FRIENDLY



"PRETTY PLEASE"
round puppy face



"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG"
belly-rub pose



"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch



"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow



"READY!"
prey bow



"YOU WILL FEED ME"



CURIOUS
head tilt



HAPPY
(or hot)



OVERJOYED
wiggly



"MMM...."



"I LOVE YOU,
DON'T STOP"