Dog Body Language
By Sherry Woodard

Just like people, dogs communicate using “body language.” Your dog is communicating with his entire body, not just his tail or his voice. You’ll need to learn to read your particular dog’s body language if you want to know how your dog is feeling. To get a sense of what your dog is trying to tell you, spend as much time as you can observing your dog and his body posture.

Because each dog is an individual and will express fear, aggression, stress or joy slightly differently, there are no hard and fast rules for interpreting dog body language. Tail-wagging, for instance, can indicate several emotions. The important thing is to look at the entire body of the dog. With that said, here are some examples of dog body language and what they might mean.

Play bow. The rear end of the dog is up, while the front end is down. The play bow generally means “I want to play.”

Tail wagging. Contrary to popular belief, tail wagging can mean many things:
- A low-hung wagging tail could mean “I am scared or unsure.”
- A high, stiff wag can mean “I am agitated, unsure or scared, but not submissive. I might bite you or your dog.” If the dog’s body is stiff, he is staring, and his ears are up, use caution. Keep the dog out of trouble – he may be about to make a bad decision.
- A loose wag – not really high or really low – normally means “I am comfortable and friend-ly.” But, you should keep watching the dog’s entire body: Some dogs have a large personal-space requirement. They will tell you if you get too close.

Freeze. A dog freezes if she is scared or guarding, or feels cornered. She may bite, so please slow down.

Rolling over. Rolling over generally means the dog is being submissive, but look at the whole dog. If the tail and mouth are loose, the dog is probably comfortable and asking for a belly rub. If the tail is tucked and the lips are stiff, the dog may be scared. Some dogs will solicit attention and then become fearful and bite, so observe the whole dog, looking for comfortable, loose body language.

Ears perked up. When a dog’s ears are forward, he is alert, interested in something.

Tail between the legs. If the dog’s tail is tucked between her legs and her ears are back against her head, she is afraid, uncomfortable with something.

Signs of Stress

When a dog is stressed, he often shows displacement behavior – any of a variety of activities that seem inappropriate in the situation they are seen in. These behaviors occur most often during times of emotional conflict. For example, a dog starts self-grooming when he’s afraid and faces the decision to fight or run away; grooming is an odd response to a “flight or fight” situation. Displacement behavior can be the dog’s attempt to calm himself.

Here are some typical displacement behaviors:
- Yawning in new or emotional situations
- Panting when it’s not hot
- Scratching himself when he’s not itchy
• Lifting a front paw as someone walks toward the dog
• Licking his lips, even though the dog hasn’t been eating or drinking
• Looking away as a person or another animal walks toward the dog
• Shaking off after someone handles the dog or another dog plays too roughly
• Stretching out as though doing a play bow, but not asking for play (sometimes a greeting when a dog is stressed)
• Making a puff (exhale) of breath, sometimes whining at the same time, and looking away or turning away
• Lying down and trying to make whatever is happening stop by not taking part in it

There is stress along with fear when a dog:
• Starts to drool when she normally doesn’t
• Paces or circles
• Tucks his tail and moves away from something
• Starts to whine
• Sweats through her feet
• Puts his hackles up, his tail is low or high, and his body is still
• Starts to growl, and may start to move away, though not all dogs move away from things they fear (Many people punish dogs for growling, which takes away a valuable form of communication)

• Starts to curl her lips (Sometimes this is all the warning a dog will give before biting)
• Starts to show his teeth (Again, the warning before biting can be brief, so try to remember every detail of what triggered the behavior so you can work on improving or at least managing it)

**Diffusing the Stress-Inducing Situation**

If you notice that a dog appears stressed, stop whatever you are doing and try to determine what the dog is reacting to. You want to help the dog become more comfortable or manage the behavior in the future so that a bite to a person or animal doesn’t happen.

Often, if we slow down whatever situation caused the fear and start exposing the dog in small amounts at a distance, we can help him to completely overcome his fear. We can also help dogs to become more comfortable in general, in order to keep them safe and to keep us safe. For more details, see “Managing a Dog with Behavior Challenges,” in this section, and the resources in Section 4 of this manual.
Staying Safe Around Dogs

Well-socialized and happy dogs can add so much to our lives and to our families. Dogs give us companionship, provide fun and physical exercise, and help us to teach our children about caring for others and about responsibility. Most dogs are the happy family pets that we enjoy being with.

There are situations, however, that can frighten or anger even the nicest of dogs, and their natural defense is to bite. There are also dogs who, due to the circumstances of their lives, may not behave like the typical family dog.

You, your family and your community can take simple steps to reduce the number of dog bites that occur. Here are some ways to keep the families and family pets in your community safe.

Dog Safety for You

- Learn how to interpret dog body language (read “Dog Body Language,” in this section).
- Always ask permission before petting or touching someone else’s dog.
- Most of the time, we encounter friendly, wiggly dogs in public. But you should be cautious if a dog goes still, becomes stiff, and/or is not wagging in a loose and friendly way.
- Don’t corner a dog. All dogs have a sense of personal space, so watch their body language as you get closer (or the dog gets closer to you).
- When approached by a strange dog, stand quietly, hands at your sides and avoid eye contact. A dog’s natural instinct is to chase, so if you run, a dog may chase. Keep your eyes on the dog and don’t turn your back.
- Do not approach dogs in cars or on chains or ropes. Dogs can be protective about their territory and may be a bit more mouthy than usual. When dogs are tied up, they know they can’t run away so their only defense will be to fight.
- To avoid startling dogs, don’t approach or touch them while they’re sleeping, fixated on something, or with puppies.
- Never get between dogs who are fighting.
- Leave dogs alone when they are eating, whether the dog is eating from a bowl or chewing a treat (generally a high-value item for dogs). Like people, dogs don’t like it when people get between them and their food.
- Don’t reach over or through fences or barriers to pet or touch a dog.
- Never tease, chase or harass a dog.
- Don’t enter a property containing a dog if you’re not accompanied by the dog’s person. Dogs can be protective of their family and territory and think it’s their job to protect them.
The Dog-Safe Family

- Children should always be accompanied around dogs, even the family dog.
- Supervising children around dogs not only protects the children from accidents but also protects the dog from harm by children who don’t always know that touching animals in a certain way can hurt them.
- Don’t leave babies unattended around dogs. Dogs may not realize that babies aren’t as strong as adults or even know what a baby is.
- If you’re expecting a baby, start early to get your dog used to the changes a baby will make in your dog’s and your lives.
- Don’t attempt to remove anything (toys, food or other objects) from your dog’s mouth.
- Teach your children about dog safety early and promote dog-safe practices.
- If you are considering bringing a new dog into your family, write down what your family is like and then consult your local shelter staff or do research on the Internet to learn about what kind of dog would be best for you.

Good Dog Habits

- Socialize your dog and make him a part of your family activities early on. Dogs also need to be socialized beyond your family and home; they need to be comfortable in the world.
- Teach your dog appropriate behavior.
- Read up on positive training techniques and get your whole family involved.
- Take your dog to obedience training.
- Make a game for the whole family of spotting and reinforcing positive behavior in your dog.
- Don’t allow children to play rough with your dog. (That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t play games like tug with your dog. Teaching your dog to play games using healthy rules will help the dog to learn self-control.)
- Avoid hitting your dog or using other forms of punishment. This can make the dog aggressive. (See “Why We Use Relationship-Based Training” in Section 1.)
- Provide lots of exercise for your dog through positive play like fetch and/or frequent walks. Walks or hikes provide great exercise for you and your canine companion. Regular activity not only gets rid of excess energy but reduces frustration levels in your pet. Interactive play increases the bond between you and your pet.
- Spay or neuter your dog. Over a six-year period, 92 percent of all fatal attacks by dogs were by intact (unneutered) dogs. Spay/neuter also reduces the likelihood of costly medical conditions and reduces the number of unwanted pets who end up in shelters.
- Make sure that your dog has lots of human interaction every day. A happy dog is a good dog. As social animals, dogs thrive on social interaction and love to be a part of the family.
- Avoid tethering (chaining or tying to a rope) your dog. Tethering removes a dog’s ability to flee and makes him/her feel vulnerable. If he/she can’t escape a perceived threat, the only option is to attack. According to a study by the CDC, tethered dogs are 2.8 times more likely to bite.
- Never let your dog roam free. Letting your dog roam free greatly increases his/her chance of injury or death from cars or attacks by people or other animals. A roaming dog may become confused or frightened, leading to aggressive behavior.
- Use caution when introducing your dog to new people, new dogs or new situations. Your goal is to provide the dog with a succession of positive experiences so his/her social skills will continually improve.
- If your dog’s behavior changes (e.g., he becomes irritable), take him to your vet for a checkup. Behavior changes can sometimes be a symptom of a medical problem.
Preventing Dog Bites on Children

By Sherry Woodard

Children can have the most amazing relationships with dogs if both are taught how to properly interact and respect each other. Proper training and management of both children and dogs can prevent tragedies from ever happening.

When a child is bitten, both the child and the dog pay a high price. Even if the child is not physically damaged, he or she is still emotionally affected. The dog may end up homeless (and a poor adoption prospect) in a shelter or be destroyed as a future safety precaution.

What does my dog need to know to prevent dog bites?

• Teach your children that they should never tease a dog. Teach them to be especially gentle and calm around dogs that they don’t know.
• Tell your children not to run, jump or scream around an unfamiliar dog, since you are unaware of what actions may cause fear or predatory aggression in that animal.
• Children are often the same size as dogs and may stare into a dog’s eyes without meaning to or without understanding that the dog may feel threatened.
• Tell your children not to wake up a sleeping dog. The dog may be startled and react aggressively.
• Tell your children not to climb on any dog, even the family dog. It may be perfectly safe with your own dog, but children may try this with another dog and get bitten.
• Tell your children not to pet strange dogs without asking permission.

What does my dog need to know?

• Socialize your puppy or dog to children. Watch your puppy or dog as she plays with children; stop the play if the child or the dog gets too rough.
• First, handle all of his body parts. If your dog objects to any part of his body being handled, go to an area of his body that he likes to have touched. As you talk soothingly to him, begin touching him there and then move over to the area that he does not like. Praise him if he does not react, and do this over and over until the dog is fine with touch everywhere. Use treats in addition to praise if necessary.

What do I need to know?

• Have your whole family go to training classes with the dog. Everyone in your family should have some understanding of acceptable dog behavior.
• Don’t stare into a dog’s eyes, since this can be threatening to him.
• Watch your dog carefully around other people’s children, since he or she does not know those children, and you can’t be certain of how your dog will react.
• Get your dog checked out by a vet if your dog’s behavior suddenly changes (i.e., she becomes more irritable). Sudden negative behavior change may mean your dog is in pain and needs medical attention.

Finally, if you have a dog that is not okay around children, it is your responsibility to protect your dog from her tendencies. Never allow her to be in a situation where she might bite a child. If you teach both children and dogs how to properly interact, they will enjoy a wonderful, safe, fun relationship.