



Dog Body Language: Decoding

Croney Research Group



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Dog Body Language is...

- A communication tool that uses postures and behaviors
- Used for dog-dog communication and humans can learn it also
- Can be used to understand how an animal is feeling

Learn More At-a-Glance:
[Body Language Application](#)

Pay Attention to Your Dog's Body Language

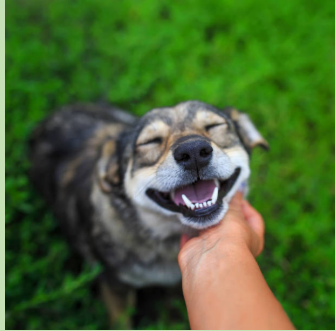
Position of:

- Ears
- Eyes
- Mouth
- Tail
- Body
- Behaviors
- Vocalization



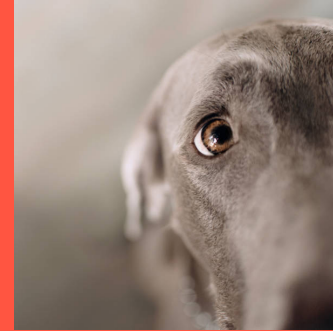
Eyes

Non-Fearful



Neutral brows, normal pupil size, soft eyes, steady relaxed gaze, oriented towards stimulus

Fearful



Brow tension, dilated pupils, wide open, whites of eye showing, squinting, hard stare, active looking, averted gaze, slow blinking, holding head low with gaze pointed upwards

Ears

Non-Fearful



Relaxed, neutral position, oriented towards stimulus

Fearful



Erect and forward, pulled back, rotated down, wrinkled tension between ears, movement or scanning

Mouth

Non-Fearful



Relaxed muzzle, soft, open, tongue out

Fearful



Tense muzzle, wrinkled nose, closed,
tooth display

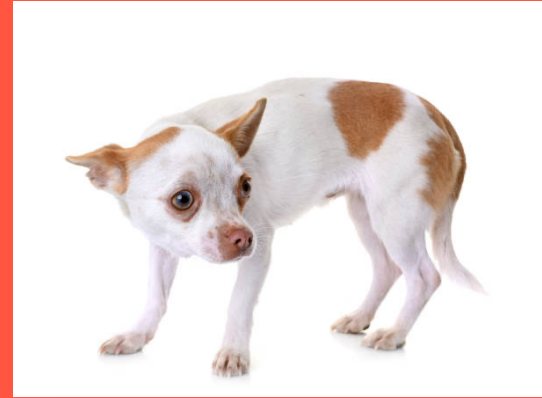
Tail

Non-Fearful



Relaxed, neutral position, loose wag

Fearful



Tense, mid or low, tucked, carried high, wagging, still

Body Posture

Non-Fearful



Relaxed muscles, soft, loose, evenly distributed weight, wiggly movement

Fearful




Tense muscles, stiff, unevenly distributed weight (low and back or high and forward), piloerection (hackles raised) or blowing coat, roll over to expose belly, hold up one paw, still



Physiological Clues of Fear and Stress

- Panting
- Rapid or irregular heart rate
- Dilated pupils
- Foot sweating
- Refusing favored food

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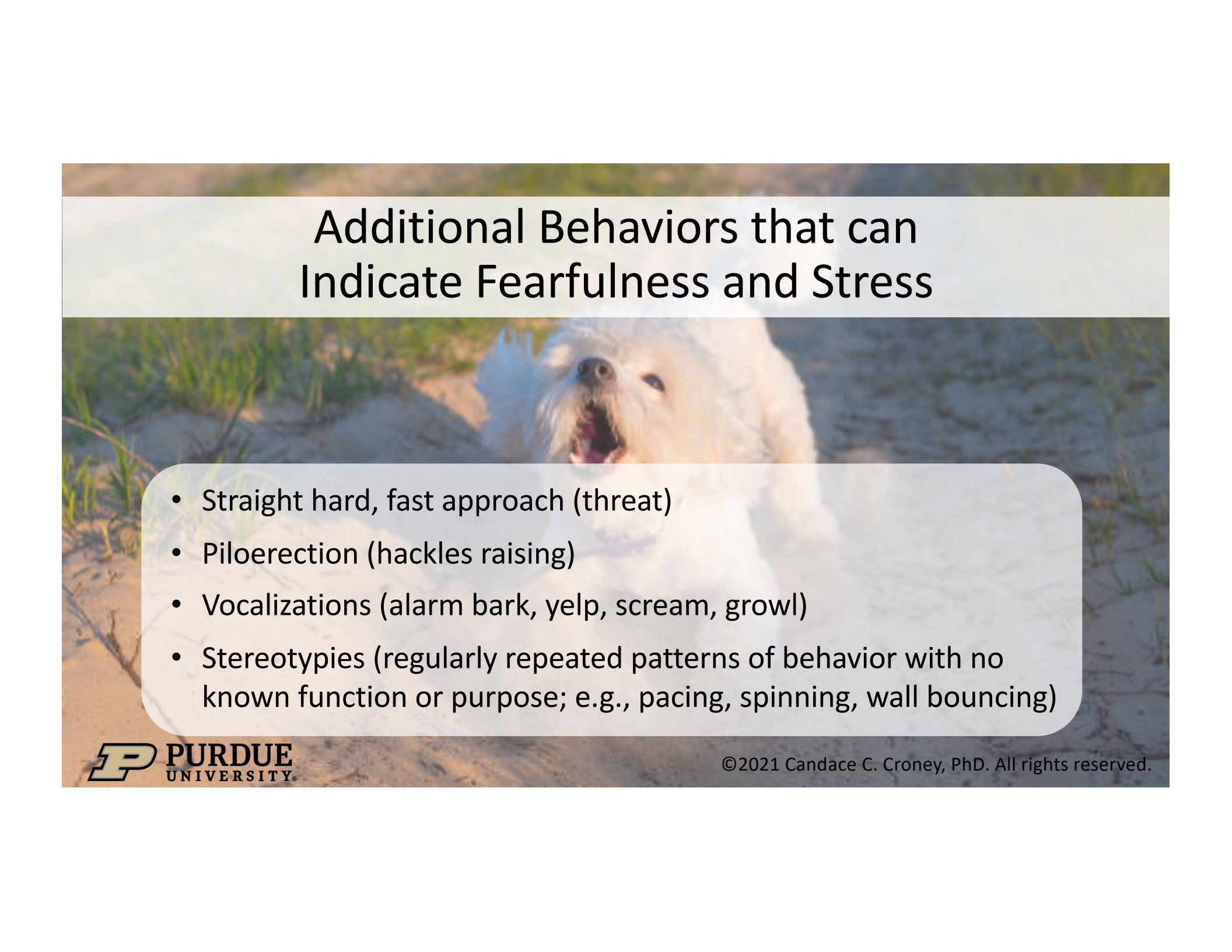
A photograph of two dogs on a grassy field. One dog is white with long ears, and the other is white with brown patches. A red leash is visible. The background is a blurred green field with a purple ball in the distance.

Four Fs of Fear: Potential Responses to Fearful Situations

- **Flight** – increasing distance
- **Fight** – offensive or defensive aggressive displays, straight hard fast approach
- **Freeze** – staying still both in location (no approach) as well as body posture, silent
- **Fidget** – engaging in overstimulated, frantic behaviors that may seem out of normal context, or include hypervigilance

Indications of Discomfort

- **Displacement behaviors** – normal behavior occurring in an abnormal context (examples: eating, drinking, sniffing, scratching)
- **Appeasement gestures** – behaviors intended to reduce threat (examples: averting gaze, play bow)
- **Stress signs** – behaviors connected to anxiety-related physiological processes to increase comfort (examples: shake-off, lip-lick, yawn)
- These behaviors are often referred to as **Calming Signals**



Additional Behaviors that can Indicate Fearfulness and Stress

- Straight hard, fast approach (threat)
- Piloerection (hackles raising)
- Vocalizations (alarm bark, yelp, scream, growl)
- Stereotypies (regularly repeated patterns of behavior with no known function or purpose; e.g., pacing, spinning, wall bouncing)



Additional Behaviors that can Indicate Fearfulness and Stress

- Not approaching
- Trembling/shaking
- Hiding
- Paw lifting
- Catatonic (severe, prolonged freezing-dog appears like a statue)



Non-Fearful Behaviors

- Approach
- Friendly (affiliative) behavior
- Attention seeking
- Neutral or undisturbed
- Play bow

A black puppy is lying on a red and white checkered floor. The puppy has its tongue out and is looking towards the camera. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Non-Fearful Behaviors

- Normal respiratory rate
- Vocalization - none, barking, whining (attention seeking/arousal)
- Absence of body postures and behaviors that indicate fear

FAQ #1

Tail wagging does not always indicate happiness

The speed and looseness of the wag, the position of the tail, the position of other body parts, and the context must all be taken into consideration



FAQ #2

A dog displaying a calming signal does not mean they will not bite

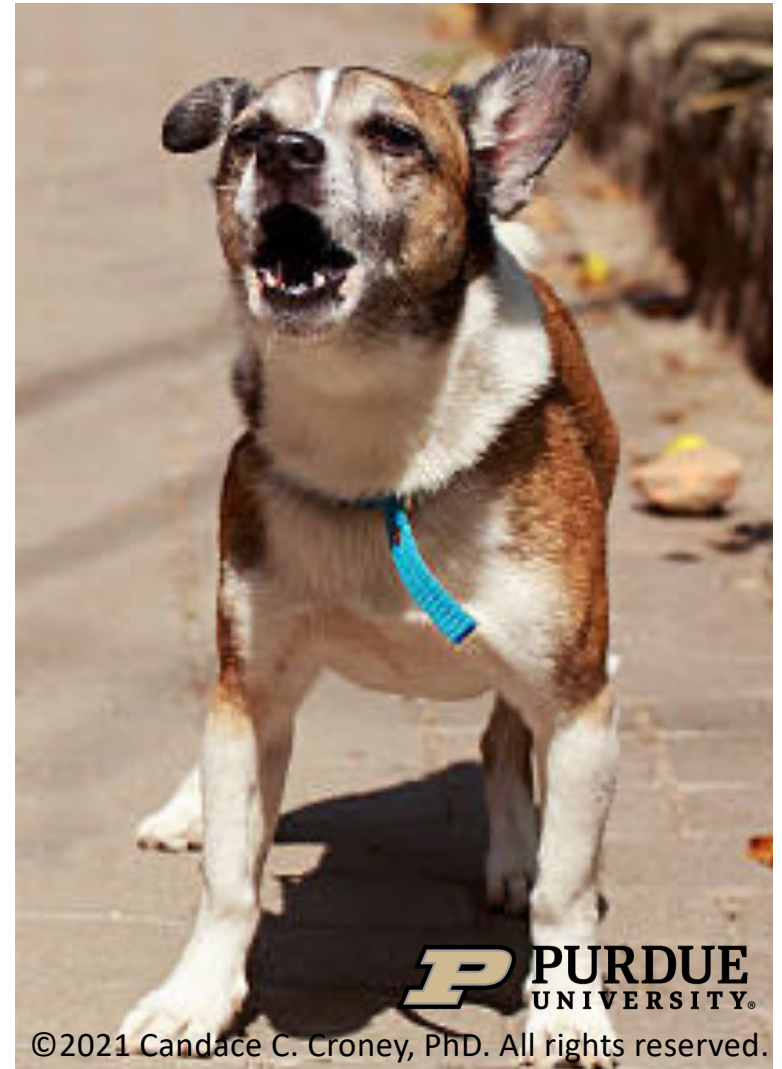
- Always use caution if a dog displays calming signals
- If these are seen with other displays of fearful behavior, then the interaction should stop for the safety of both the dog and human

FAQ #3

Dogs bark for many reasons

The type of bark as well as the body language and context must all be considered

- Low pitch indicates aggression
- High pitch indicates fear
- Pitch is better understood than tone by humans
- Shorter inter-bark intervals (more rapid barking) indicates aggression





Learn More:

- [Body Language Handout](#)
- [At-a-Glance: Body Language Application](#)



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