

Canine Body Language

Understanding dog body language can help you know when it is safe to approach or handle a dog.



Green body language and behaviors: non-fearful dog

Body posture: Relaxed, weight evenly distributed, “loose” or “wiggly” body

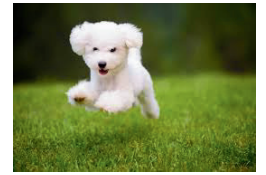
Tail: Relaxed, neutral position, may be wagging

Ears: Relaxed, neutral position

Mouth: Appears “soft,” may be open, tongue out, relaxed muzzle

Eyes: “Soft,” relaxed, neutral eyebrows, normal pupil size, steady relaxed gaze

- Approaches
- Friendly
- Seeks attention
- Calm
- Play bows
- Barking or whining for attention
- No signs of fear
- Neutral: Undisturbed from resting, eating, playing, or other maintenance behaviors



Red body language and behaviors: fearful dog

Body posture : Tense, stiff, uneven weight distribution, may be still, hair on end, may roll over and show belly or hold up one paw

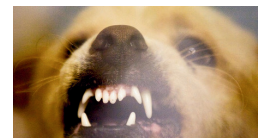
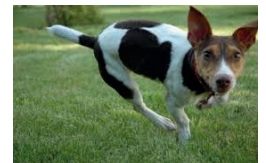
Tail: Often wagging slowly, may be tucked or high

Ears: Back, rotated down, or erect and forward, wrinkles between them

Mouth: Closed mouth, tense muzzle, wrinkled nose, showing teeth

Eyes: Wide open, dilated pupils, scanning/darting, wrinkles in brow, avoiding eye contact, slow blinking, whites of the eyes showing, head low/outstretched neck looking up over brow, “hard stare”, squinting, tense eyebrows

- No approach
- Backing away
- Aggressive displays
- Straight, hard, fast approach
- Freezing
- Hiding
- Repetitive behaviors out of context
- Alarm bark, yelp, scream, growl, silent
- Shaking, trembling, panting
- Head-turning, lip licking, turning away



When you know how your dog feels, you can set them up for success! Avoid putting your dog in a situation where they feel overwhelmed. That can lead to unwanted behaviors or injuries.

Dogs communicate so they can stay safe! Knowing how your dog feels can help you protect them from feeling threatened, or like they must fight or run away.



Yellow body language and behaviors: ambivalent dog

Ambivalent dogs:

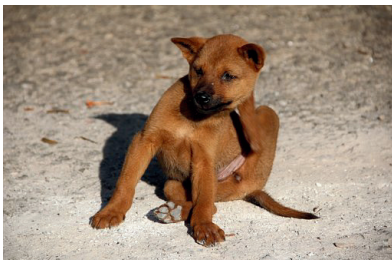
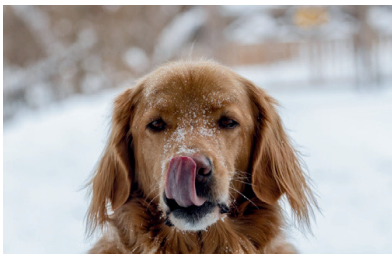
May show behaviors from both Red and Green categories

Can be hard to categorize as either Red or Green

- Unsure - approaches AND retreats
- Signs of stress with friendly behaviors and/or approach
- Approach and/or attention seeking with signs of fear
- Partial approach with friendly behaviors. No fearful body language or behaviors.



Calming Signals



When dogs are uncomfortable, they may display behaviors known as **calming signals**. These behaviors may help dogs avoid or stop conflict or help them cope with stress.

You may observe:

Displacement behaviors: Normal behavior out of its usual context. Often an animal feels frustrated or conflicted because they want to approach but they feel unsure. Some examples include: scratching, sniffing the ground, mounting, eating/drinking

Appeasement gestures: Behaviors meant to reduce threat. Examples include: play bow, turning or looking away, smiling, rolling over

Other signs of stress: These responses may decrease anxiety or allow your dog to assess the situation. Examples: lip/nose licking, yawning, shaking off, darting eyes/head swivels

Calming signals mean your dog is unsure. If you see these behaviors, be careful. If the dog also seems fearful, stop the interaction right away. This keeps you safe and protects your dog's welfare.