



## **Canine Body Language 101 & Dog Bite Prevention**

Over 4.5 million Americans are bitten by dogs every year!! Of the approximately 800,000 that seek medical treatment for dog bites, about half are children under the age of 14. These bites are often inflicted by the family dog or another dog known to the individual.

This certainly makes it sound like dogs are dangerous pets, but we know that is just not the case. Our relationship with dogs dates back over 12 million years. We love dogs and dogs love us. In fact, they have become so ingrained in our culture that most humans consider their dogs family members or “furry children”. So why all the bites?

What we have here, is a failure to communicate.

Millions of years ago, it was those wolves and wild dogs who became adept at reading our body language that began the relationship with humans that would eventually lead our domesticated dogs. Somehow, though, most of us never really learned to “read” them!

Dogs do use some sounds to communicate - like whimpers, growls and barking - but the vast majority of what they communicate they “say” with body language. And much of that body language can be very subtle.

Many who have witnessed a dog bite say that it was “unprovoked”, but this is unlikely. Dogs *always* bite for a reason, and in most cases they’ve given us plenty of warning first. We just didn’t know how to recognize it.

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR BOTH ADULTS AND CHILDREN TO LEARN TO “READ” BASIC CANINE BODY LANGUAGE SO WE CAN PICK UP ON CUES THAT A DOG IS UNCOMFORTABLE IN A SITUATION.

### **Understanding the basics of canine communication:**

#### **Calming Signals**

A dog that is cowering and shaking is obviously anxious, but did you know that lip licking is also a sign of anxiety? One way that dogs communicate anxiety, or their discomfort with a situation, is by using “calming signals”.

*The purpose of calming signals is to calm themselves when they feel threatened or uneasy, and to show others (humans or dogs) that their intentions are peaceful.*

Calming signals look like: lip licking (in the absence of food), yawning (when not waking up or going to sleep), sniffing the ground, looking away, curving their body, shaking (as if shaking off water after a bath, but without the bath), and sitting or lying down, to name a few. (To read about all of the calming signals - there are about 30 - read "On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals" by, Turid Rugaas.)

Dogs (and wolves) have strong instincts for communication, cooperation, and conflict solving. They try to AVOID conflict whenever possible. **By not recognizing their signals, it is we as humans that cause conflicts between ourselves and dogs.**

Many of these signals can happen so swiftly that they are easily missed. By really observing your dog's behavior daily, you will begin to recognize and understand these signals much more easily.

Example 1: You come home and see the dog has chewed on a shoe or couch cushion. This makes you upset so your brow becomes furrowed, you become tense and may even scold or yell at the dog. The dog lowers his head, turns away, lip licks, perhaps moves away from you. He is not admitting guilt - it is unlikely he has any idea at all what you are upset about - he is simply using calming signals to soothe you and diffuse a tense situation.

Example 2: You are at obedience class with your dog and are becoming frustrated because your dog is having a hard time understanding what you want him to do. He can see your body is tense and hear the tone of your voice and suddenly becomes immensely interested in an apparently amazing smell on the floor. No, he really isn't ignoring you as it would seem. He is using calming signals to diffuse what he feels is a tense situation. (this is a good time to give both you and your dog a break to calm down)

Example 3: A toddler is walking towards your dog and you see the dog turn his head away from the child and yawn. This is a signal that your dog is uncomfortable with the child's approach. This is an important time to step in and redirect the toddler away from the dog...or risk a possible bite.

Dogs use facial features and all parts of their bodies to communicate. It is important to look at all the body language cumulatively to figure out what the dog is trying to convey.

### Body Language:

Tail: The tail is a barometer. 1) A tail level with the plain of the back = relaxed/neutral state of mind; 2) Above the plain of the back = arousal (excited, alert, territorial, etc); 3) Below the plane of the back = fearful/concerned/submissive.

Wagging Tail: A wagging tail does *not* always signal a happy, friendly dog! 1) If the whole body is wiggling and wagging along with the tail = happy/friendly dog. 2) A slow, deliberate wag with tail above body level = aroused or aggressive. 3) A tucked wagging (possibly just the tail tip) = fearful/submissive.

Mouth: 1) A relaxed, slightly open panting mouth = friendliness/happiness. 2) A closed mouth can = alert or worried. 3) Wide mouth, fast panting (in the absence of exercise) can = state of stress or fear.

Showing teeth: Teeth showing does not always indicate aggression. A fearful dog may pull back the corners of it's mouth into a grimace, thus making some teeth visible. If the corners of the mouth are pushed forward, like a pucker, and front lips are curled up exposing the teeth, with a wrinkled nose = assertiveness or aggression/may bite! Both these dogs should be avoided.

Eyes: 1) Relaxed, squinty or blinky eyes = friendliness/happiness and/or submission. 2) Wide eyes with the whites showing = fear or arousal. 3) Intense stare with little blinking indicates high arousal/may bite!

Head: 1) A head held high may = alert/interest or arousal/aggression. 2) A head cocked to the side = interest. 3) A head held low or drooping = worried, fear, unhappiness, or submission.

Ears: 1) Ears held erect = arousal or interest. 2) Ears back and down = submission or fear. 3) Relaxed, slightly back ears = happy/friendly.

Hair: Hair raised along the back or rump indicates anxiety, fear, arousal, or aggression. This dog should be avoided.

All parts of the dogs body should be “read” together to determine mood or intentions. Some dogs can send mixed signals (just like humans), so if the dog seems anxious or worried at all, or if you aren’t sure, it’s best to avoid that dog.

PARENTS SHOULD SUPERVISE ALL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DOGS AND CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 10. Bites can occur in the blink of an eye, even with the family dog, so be present to prevent it!

### **Do’s & Don’ts for interacting with dogs:**

- **NEVER** allow rough play between your child and your dog. Teach your children how to play fairly (i.e. take turns with the dog winning at tug ‘o’ war) and kindly.
- **Dogs don’t like hugs and kisses!!** Teach children not to hug dogs. Instead encourage them to pet/scratch their chests, neck and shoulders (avoid the top of the head). Some dogs can learn to tolerate hugs from their “special” people, but may not tolerate it from anyone else. Hugs and kisses are the most common reason that children get bitten in the face.
- **“Be a tree”** If a strange dog approaches or is bothering/frightening you or your child, stand still like a tree, fold your arms (branches) and look at your feet (roots). The dog will most likely lose interest and wander away.
- **Greet a dog sideways, not head-on.** Face-on approaches can be threatening or intimidating to a dog. Leaning or bending over them can also be scary, so always crouch down. When a dog greets a dog, they briefly make eye contact, then look away, and then approach in a sideways or circular type manner to let the other dog know they are friendly. So when we greet a dog we should turn sideways, crouch down, and don’t hold eye contact-look at their feet instead.
- **Ask!** Don’t forget to *ask the owner’s permission* first, then “ask” the dog permission by observing his behavior - does he look friendly? Allow him to approach you first. Crouch down sideways and extend your hand. Watch his behavior. If he approaches and gives you friendly signals, proceed!
- **Don’t pet the head!** Dogs exert dominance over other dogs by placing their head or paws over the head or shoulders of another dog. Reaching over to pet the top of a dog’s head can be seen by them as a challenge or threat. Instead, teach children to pet a dog’s chest & shoulders, or the SIDE of their neck.
- **Approach calmly.** Running or rushing towards a dog can be scary. Teach kids to walk slowly around dogs. Running away from a dog can also trigger a chase.
- **Stop** Don’t approach a tied, crated, penned, or dog in a car. These dogs will feel more trapped, possibly fearful, and an increased need to defend their territory.

- Teach children to give space to old, sick or injured dogs. Pain and illness can make dogs (just like humans) more cranky and less tolerant. They should also respect a dog that has food, or a favorite bone, treat or toy. DO NOT encourage your child to put their hands in a food dish or pet a dog that is eating or chewing a bone!!! That is asking for a bite! In addition, if a dog has one of the children's toys, teach the child to get an adult to retrieve it, rather than try to get it back themselves. The adult should then offer a treat to the dog in exchange for the toy in order to positively reinforce the act of giving something up. Punishing the dog will only make it feel the need to defend it's prized possessions more fiercely.

#### What to do when faced with a growling or aggressive dog:

If faced with a charging or aggressive dog, both adults or children should "be a tree". Stand still and look at the ground. Even backing away could trigger an attack in a highly aroused dog. Most dogs, except for the very rare truly emotionally disturbed dog, will lose interest and leave. In the case that a person is knocked over, they should lie very still like a log and cover the back of their neck with their hands.

#### Things you can do to be a responsible dog owner:

- Spay or neuter your dog. Spayed and neutered dogs are less likely to bite.
- Socialize your puppy!! Undersocialized dogs are a higher risk to both their owners and others because they fear everyday things. Fearful dogs are more likely to bite.
- Take your dog to reward-based training classes. Positive training results in a calmer, less reactive dog. Visit [forcefreewisconsin.com](http://forcefreewisconsin.com) to find a force free trainer in your area.
- Make your dog part of the family. Don't leave the dog tied or penned outside most or all of the day. These dogs become frustrated, feel defenseless and territorial. They are nearly three times more likely to bite.
- Don't wait for something serious to happen. The first time your dog exhibits aggressive behavior towards anybody - even if no injury occurs - seek help from a certified behaviorist or trainer!
- Be aware of your dog's triggers (i.e. large crowds, thunderstorms, children, etc) and help your dog to avoid those situations. Don't set them up for failure!! If desired, *seek help from a professional* to help desensitize them from the scary stimulus (DON'T try to do it yourself, you may end up making the problem worse).

- Never leave children under the age of 10 alone with a dog. Teach them to treat dogs gently and kindly, and to give them space and rest times.
- Most importantly, enjoy dogs!!!! They are amazing creatures. By learning and practicing the art of understanding what they are telling us with their behaviors and body language, we can create and even deeper bond between dogs and humans.

#### More Reading/Resources:

- Living With Kids & Dogs...Without Losing Your Mind, by Colleen Pelar
- Raising Puppies and Kids Together - A Guide For Parents, by Pia Silvani & Lynn Eckhardt
- Dogs, Cats & Kids, a video by the Humane Society of the United States
- Children and Pets Living Together, an article by the ASPCA
- Canine Body Language, and article by the ASPCA
- On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals, by Turid Rugaas
- Patricia McConnell, PhD, Dog Trainer, Behaviorist -> [www.patriciamcconnell.com](http://www.patriciamcconnell.com)

Information for this handout obtained from:

Manette Kohler, DVM, Veterinary Behavior Consultant, "Dog Bite Prevention, Pet Expo 2011"  
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