



(Far left) A child hugging a Jack Russell mix. Note the worried expression on the dog's face. This dog was not raised in a home with children, although the dog is quite patient and friendly toward them. The dog's expression was a unique opportunity for the owner to observe that her dog was uncomfortable and politely ask the child to refrain from hugging. Many dogs bite children on the face each year due to hugging. Unfortunately when one hugs a dog they cannot see the dog's expression. Hugging can be taken as a sign of dominance to some dogs unless they are taught at an early age that hugging is a form of human affection.

By contrast, the photo on the left shows a confident dog that doesn't mind being hugged by two children. This dog was raised since early puppyhood in a family with small children and has come to understand their way of expressing affection.

By KAREN FAZIO • MY BEST FRIEND DOG TRAINING, LLC

Recognizing the subtleties of canine: Body Language

According to the Humane Society of the United States, each year about 4.5 million people in the U.S. are bitten by dogs—80 percent of them by dogs they know—and it's estimated that more than half of those victims are less than 13 years old. What's more, children are at least three times more likely than adults to sustain a serious dog bite.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest in children ages 5 to 9 years, and children are more likely than adults to receive medical attention for dog bites.

The CDC also notes that

adult males are more likely than females to be bitten.

The saddest part of these statistics is that almost all bites can be prevented. The Walt Disney characterization of the dog has done a great injustice to canines by intimating that every one should be happy, welcoming of strangers and accepting of groping.

In films such as *Lady and the Tramp* stray dogs are characterized as villains by snarling and growling and presenting threatening displays toward Lady.

We have forever been influenced by such movies to make us feel that growling dogs are bad and timid or

quiet dogs are good.

While everyone loves a happy-go-lucky dog that's wagging its tail or giving us kisses, we have a tendency to demonize all others.

What most fail to realize is both types of dog are attempting to communicate with us. One is saying I like people and the other is saying I'm afraid of people.

In our society we teach children at a very young age never to talk to strangers. However, we expect that dogs should be able to approach all strangers without the least bit of apprehension.

This double-standard has placed many a good dog in shelters where they are labeled aggressive and most hardly ever get adopted. This is especially so if the dog has a bite history or problems with resource guarding.

Bite histories have been quite misunderstood as well. It is important to understand that

there are varying degrees of bites. Lets explore these for a moment.

Dr. Ian Dunbar, the father of bite inhibition and author of *AFTER You Get Your Puppy*, notes that the courts stand firmly that the dictionary definition of a 'bite' shall be used. A typical definition of 'bite' is "to seize with the teeth so that they enter, grip or wound."

To quantify the degree of severity, Dr. Ian Dunbar, has created the following guide on bite levels. Each of the six levels are bites, and all—even number one—are an indication you and your dog need qualified, professional help... quickly.

Level 1: This bite does not touch the skin. The dog is air biting or snapping.

Level 2: This bite makes contact with the skin, but doesn't break the skin. Pain and bruising may result, but no abrasions will be visible.

Level 3: This bite ranges from a one to three punctures in a single bite with on puncture less than ½ the depth of the eye-tooth (fang) with or without some tearing.

Level 4: The dog is putting great pressure into the bite. 1 to 4 puncture wounds with or without tearing, more than ½ the depth of the eye tooth. This is usually accompanied with bruising and likely to require medical attention.

These injuries suggest the dog grabbed and shook what was in it's mouth.

Level 5: Multiple level 4 bites. This dog is usually beyond the ability to reason and may feel his/her life is threatened.

Level 6: The dog has killed.

What is important to consider when evaluating bite levels is that all bites start out at level one. As the dog gets more confident, or the air snapping is ignored, the bite level increases with each bite attempt until it reaches maximum effectiveness.

Also, dogs who were punished for snarling or snapping may bypass level 1 and jump right to level 3. This is particularly so in dogs that seem to give no warning. The most frightening example of a dog who was punished for showing aggressive displays is the dog that learned to wag its tail and appear friendly and when reached for attacks an individual.

This is an extreme example, but when evaluating a friendly dog that seems to attack "out of nowhere," this is a very important factor to consider and one that's quite difficult to work with.

When working with aggression cases I would much rather work with the dog that snarls and growls at me rather than one that gives no warnings, or the odd-ball that

wags its tail.

When working with such dogs, however, usually there are very subtle—and silent—body language signals that serve as warnings that an otherwise untrained eye may miss or even misinterpret.

In a recent episode of *Rescue Ink*, they had rescued a Rottweiler that needed to be placed in a no kill shelter. The dog was friendly to people and other animals but needed to pass the resource guarding portion of the shelter's evaluation.

The shelter worker placed a bowl of food on the ground and allowed the dog to eat. Simultaneously she touched the dog's back with an extend-a-hand and the dog lifted its lip and growled. Fail.

They then placed the hand near the dog's mouth and bowl and the dog bit at the extend-a-hand. Fail.

As I was watching this program I immediately noticed that the extend-a-hand was not damaged. The general



Here both of these dogs are anticipating a treat after being commanded to sit/stay. It's a moment of anticipation. The shepherd gives a tongue flick to ease the tension since the hound on the right has a habit of stealing food from his mouth.

audience may have been thinking, “this is a dangerous dog,” but any canine professional would have realized that this dog showed an incredible amount of bite inhibition because this breed has the bite pressure not only to damage the extend-a-hand, but crush bone.

The fact that the extend-a-hand was still intact and the dog merely took threatening snaps at the hand told me this dog had a ton of potential and that his resource guarding issue can be worked on.

Thankfully, the shelter workers thought so too and took the dog in.

Let’s take a look at some common caninebody posturing and explore their variations, subtleties and meaning:

Lip licking: or commonly known as tongue flicking, is an appeasement gesture/calming signal that dogs send out in order ease tensions or send a message they mean no harm. Dogs that feel overwhelmed or apprehensive may exhibit such a signal. It’s quite subtle and can commonly be misunderstood that the dog may be hungry.

You also may see this gesture when a dog is taking in a particular scent. Since the mucous on the leather of the nose helps to gather scent

molecules, some dogs will lick their nose in an effort to moisten it in an effort to gain better scent reception.

When seeing this signal you must put the situation it appears in context.

For instance, if you take your dog to the vet and it’s tongue flicking the dog most likely is under stress. However, if you’re holding a steak bone this signal would mean “yummy! give me some! I can hardly can’t. Pleeeeease let me have it now!”

Yawning: This also is a calming signal that most often appears when a dog is stressed. You may see this signal appear when tensions are running high in a household, if the dog is fearful of the groomer or has



In the same photo as the previous page (expanded) Lucy (right) offers an appeasement/begging gesture by lifting her paw just moments before treats were administered.

fears of the car and more. It’s a dog’s way of telling everyone around him “I’m bored with this, can we move-on already?” or “everything is going to be okay,” and so helps to ease his own feelings of tension and those around him. It is a group signal. Ever wonder why you can’t control a yawn when you see someone else yawning? This is a pretty powerful signal and it sends powerful messages to a group.

My Shepherd yawns quite a bit right before we go on a walk—his most favorite of all activities! It is a displacement activity that helps to relieve tension and his uncontrollable excitement.

Piloerection: is raised fur (hackles) on the shoulders and base of the tail. In some instances fur will be raised along the spine as well. Piloerection is an indication that the dog is in a highly aroused state. You may see this appear during exuberant play or if the dog feels threatened in any way.

Fanned Tail: Although not as common, fanned-out fur along the underside of a dog’s tail (similar to a fish fin) may also indicate a state of excitement. It is not uncommon to see Beagle tails fan out when they catch

a scent they're interested in. This is a very subtle signal that a dog is aroused, quite interested in something, a signal of intent, or it feels a bit uneasy.

Paw lifting: is another appeasement gesture. You may see this when your dog is begging you for attention or if the dog is confused and doesn't understand you. Under these circumstances a dog's body will be leaning forward.

It also appears when a dog is in a stressful state or if it's frightened. In this case, the paw that is closest to what it fears will lift as the dog turns its head away (opposite direction) from what it fears. The body will tend to lean backward.

It's wise to acknowledge this signal and back off slowly, since for many dogs this is a precursor to a bite. This is especially true of those dogs that have been punished for growling.

This is not to say that all dogs that lift a paw, lean back and look away will bite, but it is a clear indication that they are quite overwhelmed and that should exercise caution.

The dog is saying "okay, I give in." If the paw-lift doesn't work some dogs will throw themselves on their backs and present you with their bellies while simultaneously lifting a paw or lifting one rear leg to



This photo shows whale eye and a pimpled pucker. Notice how the lips are pulled forward. Also take note of the dog's expression as a whole—eyebrows drawn together. If I had to give this expression an emotion I would say the dog is quite angry.

show you their more delicate parts. This is the dog saying "okay, you didn't get the message, so I'm showing you the most sensitive part of my body. I give in!"

In these situations it's best to know your dog. I often hear from individuals who adopted shelter dogs—that later on began showing signs of aggression—that "the dog was so submissive" because



This dog shows us a relaxed happy smile. Notice the relaxed jaw and smooth forehead.

when they met the dog it immediately rolled over to show them its belly.

Many dogs will show you their belly when they are completely overwhelmed. In

such cases, the difference between a dog that's fearful or the one looking for a belly rub may lay in expression of the face. Are the eye brows drawn together? Is the dog giving you tongue flicks? Do you see the whites of the dog's eyes? All these signals are those of a dog that's overwhelmed.

The fear grimace: often mistaken for a smile the fear grimace is indicative of a fearful state. It's usually accompanied by dilated pupils and rounded eyes. The difference between a fear grimace and an actual smile is that a fear grimace is quite exaggerated and usually is accompanied by creased forehead, eyebrows drawn together and lips drawn back—often exposing all of its teeth—including back molars. The jowls are tensely pulled back giving the dog wrinkles which could be mistaken for smile lines.

A fear grimace is the kind of smile a child puts on when they are trying to appear happy when they're actually quite frightened of something.

Some of us have seen this in the child who sees a parent dressed up in a scary Halloween costume. The child knows it's his parent and smiles even though he's quite scared.

The smile: The smile, on the other hand, is quite softer. The eyes often appear almond-shaped and squinty—very much like ours do when we smile. The jaw is relaxed and the mouth is usually open. All muscles around the mouth appear relaxed and droopy and the forehead is smooth. This is an indication a dog is in a relaxed state of mind.

Whale eye: is when the eyes are large and rounded exposing the whites of the eye. This happens when a dog is quite fearful or extremely wary of something or someone. If you see whale eye, back off.

Some breeds, even if they aren't stressed, may show some of the whites of their eyes. This is particularly so of breeds like the Pug, French Bulldog, and to some extent, the Boxer. When assessing whale eye in these breeds you must take note of how much white of the eye appears when the dog is relaxed. Under stress you would notice an increase.

The pimped pucker: a dangerously aggressive dog is one who growls with a closed mouth as the lips move forward in a pucker. Sometimes this is accompanied by a pimpling of the whisker follicles (vibrissae) on the muzzle. This means that a bite is almost certain. Some dogs who have

had growling beat out of them often will display this silent warning. Many bites which appear 'out of nowhere' begin with a pimpling pucker. It's not easy to detect which is why so many people are bitten by silent, seemingly calm dogs. It's especially difficult to detect on dogs with long hair around their muzzles.

The growl and snarl: growling is a warning sign. Some individuals punish their dogs for growling. This is a very dangerous practice because they are teaching the dog to bypass its early warning system and skip right to the next level—a bite.

Growling may occur with a lifted lip showing a canine or its front teeth (snarl). The corners of the mouth may be pulled back, or pulled forward. If the lips are pulled back the growl is indicative of a fearful dog.

When the corners of a dog's mouth pulled back it is a sign of fear. A closed mouth with lips drawn forward is a sign of dominance. Regardless of whether it's fear or dominance-related this is a red flag warning.

There has been a lot of misconceptions about aggression and dominance of late. In fear-aggression cases dogs deal with frightening things two ways. They either take a fearful-submissive approach by growling/

snarling in the hopes that their adversary will back off. Some fearful dogs, for example, may growl and snarl as they back up.

Others take a proactive approach and choose to chase or bite their adversary to send them a clear message they are not fooling around. This approach is the dominant approach. However, the foundation for most aggression cases is fear-based—whether or not the dog chooses to warn off or attack the threat.

Presenting the neck: a dog can send a message that it means no harm by turning its head away from another and displaying the side of its neck. This gesture is used by one dog toward another when it wants to convey it's not a threat. By turning its head away it avoids direct eye contact. In the dog world direct eye contact is a direct challenge.

Freezing: a dog that freezes in place is an explosion waiting to happen. Usually a dog will resort to the freeze when all other signals have been ignored or all other early warning signals were beaten out of the dog. If you're ever in the presence of a dog that freezes, stop, slowly turn sideways and back away making sure to avoid eye contact.

Freezing is also a precursor

to a dog fight. When two dogs meet and both freeze, it's best to calmly separate them before an outburst presents itself. I have often observed freezing when two dogs of the same sex are facing each other cheek-to-cheek. All it takes is a slight lift of one dog's chin—a sign a dog intends to place his head over the other's shoulder—and kaboom! a dog fight ensues.

Drooling: is a sign of an intensely stressed or fearful state of mind. I once was called in to consult with a woman for a suspected sibling rivalry case between her newly adopted 10-month old female terrier mix and her 7-year old female Shepherd mix. After a couple of weeks in the house together terrier mix began attacking the older dog.

The red flag here was that the terrier drooled excessively, combined with a fear grimace and heavy panting whenever the older dog was present. This was a very dangerous situation. Combine an overly fearful state, fear grimace, drooling, aggression, and you're looking at a potential disaster. For her oldest

dog's sake and the sake of her terrier mix puppy, I recommended that the younger dog be re-homed.

Had the elder dog not been sick and very old I may have suggested a training program. However, at her old age it was just unfair to put her through such stress. The younger dog found a wonderful home with a family friend.

The tail wag: a wagging tail is not always a sign of a happy dog. If a dog's whole hindquarters is wagging along with the tail it's in a happy state of mind. If only the tail is wagging (especially at just the tip) it is a sign of excitement or intent.

Taking the time to observe the body language of your dog can be an enjoyable and enlightening experience. It can also provide you with a wealth of information on how dogs communicate with each other and can enhance and deepen your relationship.

Photos and videos can provide a glimpse into subtle body posturing and facial expressions that humans often don't catch—some of which occur within a split second.

If you begin taking photos of your dogs you may be quite amazed at what you can capture on camera. Photos and videos also provide helpful information to the trainer or behaviorist working with your dogs. ☆

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SUGGESTED READING:

- *On Aggression*, by Konrad Lorenz
- *For the Love of A Dog*, by Dr. Patricia McConnell;
- *AFTER You Get Your Puppy*, by Dr. Ian Dunbar.
- *The Intelligence of Dogs*, by Stanley Coren
- *How Dogs Think*, by Stanley Coren
- *Help For Your Fearful Dog* by Nicole Wilde

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