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For adopters, volunteers and shelter teams

Edition 1 · October 2026

A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING SHELTER PETS

Dog & Cat Body Language

Read the animal before you say hello.

Most dogs give several quiet warnings before they growl or bite [5, 7], and owners often miss the early ones [15].

Cats rarely warn for long: they freeze, hide or flee first [12]. In any animal, read the whole body: one sign alone can mislead [3, 16].

Warnings that escalate: after K. Shepherd's Ladder of Aggression, BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd ed., 2009 [7].

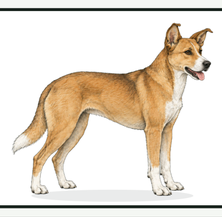
Dogs

Calm to warning

Cats

EYES soft, a normal shape
MOUTH relaxed, open or closed
BODY loose; tail at its natural height

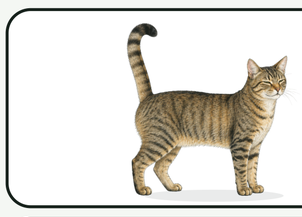
Sources 1



Calm

Relaxed and at ease.

Fine to say hello, if they come to you.

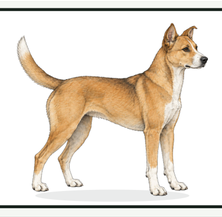


EYES soft; slow blinks
TAIL up, with a curved tip, to greet
BODY loose, standing easy

Sources 2, 8, 12, 18, 19, 22

EARS up and forward
MOUTH closed
BODY still and tall, weight forward

Sources 3



Alert

Interested, assessing.

Pause. Let them look first.

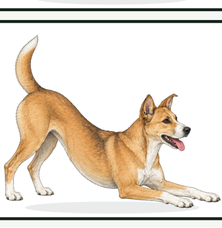


EARS upright, toward the sound
EYES open and watching
TAIL still; the tip may twitch

Sources 8

BOW front end down, rear end up
MOUTH open and relaxed
BODY bouncy; swaps roles

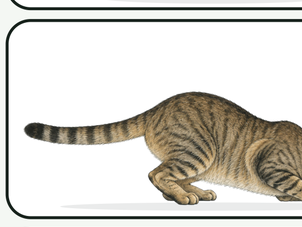
Sources 1, 13, 14



Playful

An invitation to play.

Keep it gentle and short, with breaks.

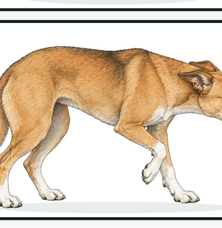


STALK creeps low, then pounces
BELLY up in play: not a request to rub
TOYS a wand toy, not your hand

Sources 4, 12, 23

EYES whale eye, or looking away
MOUTH lip licks, yawns
BODY head lowered; paw lift

Sources 6, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17



Stressed

Uneasy.

Stop what you are doing. Give room.

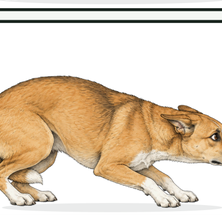


EARS turned out to the sides
EYES pupils dilated
BODY crouched and tense

Sources 2, 8, 12

EARS flattened back
TAIL tucked between the legs
BODY crouched, head low

Sources 3, 6, 11



Fearful

Wants to get away.

Back off. Never corner, reach or lean over.

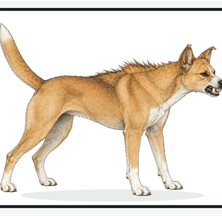


EARS flat, sideways or back
EYES pupils fully dilated
BODY crouched low, tail tucked in

Sources 4, 8, 12

EYES a hard, direct stare
MOUTH teeth bared; growl, snap
BODY stiff and still; hackles may rise

Sources 3, 5, 6



Warning

A clear request for space.

Stop. Move away calmly, and don't stare back.



EARS flattened to the head
MOUTH open; hiss, spit or growl
BODY arched, side-on, fur raised

Sources 2, 4

Meeting a shelter pet

Ask the staff first, and read the kennel card [3, 24]. Then:

Dogs

Sources 3, 24



1 Let the dog come to you and sniff your hand.



2 Pet the chest or shoulders, not the top of the head.



3 Pet for a few seconds, then pause. Go on only if they ask for more.



4 Stress signs? Take your hand away and calmly step back.

Cats

Sources 9, 12, 18, 20, 21



1 Get down to the cat's level. Don't lean over or stare.



2 Hold out a soft hand, not too close. Let the cat choose to sniff.



3 Stroke the head and cheeks. Avoid the belly and the base of the tail.



4 Let a hiding cat hide: a hiding box lowers stress.

SOURCES All sources read 14 October 2026. Corrections: hello@petnecto.com · Edition 1 · October 2026

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