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].

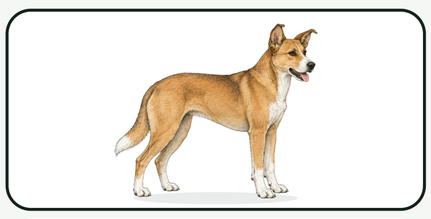
Dogs

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.

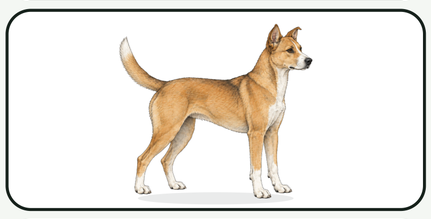


EYES soft; slow blinks
TAIL up, with a curved tip, to greet
BODY loose, standing easy

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

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

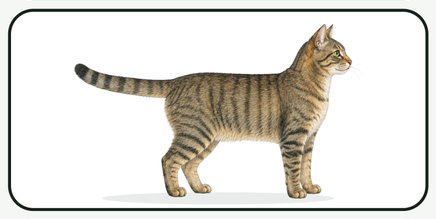
Sources 3



Alert

Interested, assessing.

Pause. Let them look first.

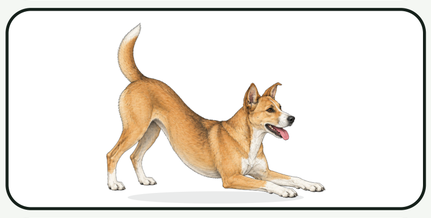


EARS upright, toward the sound
EYES open and watching
TAIL still; the tip may twitch

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.

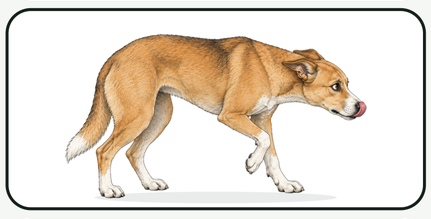


STALK creeps low, then pounces
BELLY up in play: not a request to rub
TOYS a wand toy, not your hand

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.

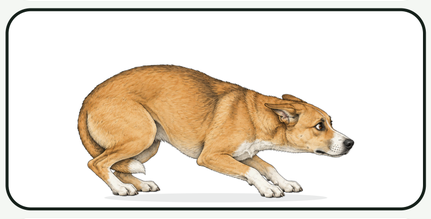


EARS turned out to the sides
EYES pupils dilated
BODY crouched and tense

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.

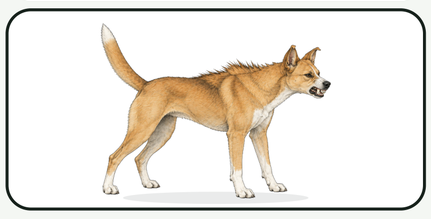


EARS flat, sideways or back
EYES pupils fully dilated
BODY crouched low, tail tucked in

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

1 RSPCA. Understanding your dog's body language. rspca.org.uk

2 RSPCA. Understanding your cat's behaviour. rspca.org.uk

3 ASPCA. Dog bite prevention. aspca.org

4 ASPCA. Aggression in cats. aspca.org

5 ASPCA. Aggression (dogs). aspca.org. Cited for warning signs before bites, not for its training advice.

6 PDSA. Canine communication: recognising stress in your dog. pdsa.org.uk

7 Shepherd K (2009). Ladder of aggression. In Horwitz DF, Mills DS (eds), BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd ed. BSAVA.

8 Kessler MR, Turner DC (1997). Stress and adaptation of cats housed singly, in pairs and in groups in boarding catteries. Anim Welf 6:243–254. Table as reproduced by Maddie's Fund.

9 van der Leij WJR et al. (2019). The effect of a hiding box on stress levels and body weight in Dutch shelter cats. PLoS ONE 14:e0223492. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0223492

10 AVSAB (2021). Position statement on humane dog training. avsab.org

11 Hammerle M et al. (2015). AAHA canine and feline behavior management guidelines. J Am Anim Hosp Assoc 51:205–221. doi:10.5326/JAAHA-MS-6527

12 Rodan I et al. (2022). AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly veterinary interaction guidelines: approach and handling techniques. J Feline Med Surg 24:1093–1132. doi:10.1177/1098612X221128760

13 Bekoff M (1995). Play signals as punctuation. Behaviour 132:419–429. doi:10.1163/156853995X00649

14 Špinka M, Newberry RC, Bekoff M (2001). Mammalian play: training for the unexpected. Q Rev Biol 76:141–168. doi:10.1086/393866

15 Mariti C et al. (2012). Perception of dogs' stress by their owners. J Vet Behav 7:213–219. doi:10.1016/j.jveb.2011.09.004

16 Beerda B et al. (2000). Behavioural and hormonal indicators of enduring environmental stress in dogs. Anim Welf 9:49–62. doi:10.1017/S0962728600022247

17 Scalia B, Alberghina D, Panzera M (2017). Influence of low stress handling during clinical visit on physiological and behavioural indicators in adult dogs. Pet Behav Sci 4:20–22. doi:10.21071/pbs.v0i4.10131

18 Humphrey T et al. (2020). The role of cat eye narrowing movements in cat–human communication. Sci Rep 10:16503. doi:10.1038/s41598-020-73426-0

19 Humphrey T et al. (2020). Slow blink eye closure in shelter cats is related to quicker adoption. Animals 10:2256. doi:10.3390/ani10122256

20 Ellis SLH et al. (2015). The influence of body region, handler familiarity and order of region handled on the domestic cat's response to being stroked. Appl Anim Behav Sci 173:60–67. doi:10.1016/j.applanim.2014.11.002

21 Kry K, Casey R (2007). The effect of hiding enrichment on stress levels and behaviour of domestic cats in a shelter setting. Anim Welf 16:375–383. doi:10.1017/S0962728600027196

22 Cafazzo S, Natoli E (2009). The social function of tail up in the domestic cat. Behav Processes 80:60–66. doi:10.1016/j.beproc.2008.09.008

23 International Cat Care. Why do cats..? icatcare.org (updated 26 Sept 2025)

24 Humane Society of Silicon Valley (2025). Shy dog training guide: consent petting. hssv.org. Shelter practice, not a trial.