Dog body language

Read the animal before you say hello.

Most dogs give several quiet warnings before they growl or bite [1, 2], and owners often miss the early ones [3].

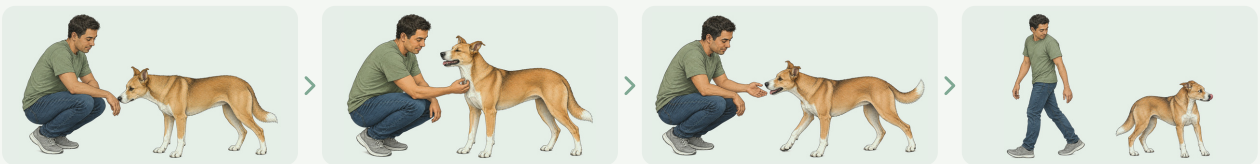
Warnings that escalate: after K. Shepherd's Ladder of Aggression, BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd ed., 2009 [2].



Calm	Alert	Playful	Stressed	Fearful	Warning
Relaxed and at ease. **Fine to say hello, if they come to you.**	Interested, assessing. **Pause. Let them look first.**	An invitation to play. **Keep it gentle and short, with breaks.**	Uneasy. **Stop what you are doing. Give room.**	Wants to get away. **Back off. Never corner, reach or lean over.**	A clear request for space. **Stop. Move away calmly, and don't stare back.**
EYES soft, a normal shape	**EARS** up and forward	**BOW** front end down, rear end up	**EYES** whale eye, or looking away	**EARS** flattened back	**EYES** a hard, direct stare
MOUTH relaxed, open or closed	**MOUTH** closed	**MOUTH** open and relaxed	**MOUTH** lip licks, yawns	**TAIL** tucked between the legs	**MOUTH** teeth bared; growl, snap
BODY loose; tail at its natural height	**BODY** still and tall, weight forward	**BODY** bouncy; swaps roles	**BODY** head lowered; paw lift	**BODY** crouched, head low	**BODY** stiff and still; hackles may rise
[4]	[5]	[4, 6, 7]	[3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]	[5, 8, 10]	[1, 5, 8]

Meeting a shelter dog

Ask the staff first, and read the kennel card [5, 13]. Then: [5, 13]



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.

SOURCES All sources read 14 October 2026.

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

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

3 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

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

5 ASPCA. Dog bite prevention. aspca.org

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

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

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

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

10 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

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

Corrections: hello@petnecto.com

12 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

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