Petnecto
adoptable pets · petnecto.com

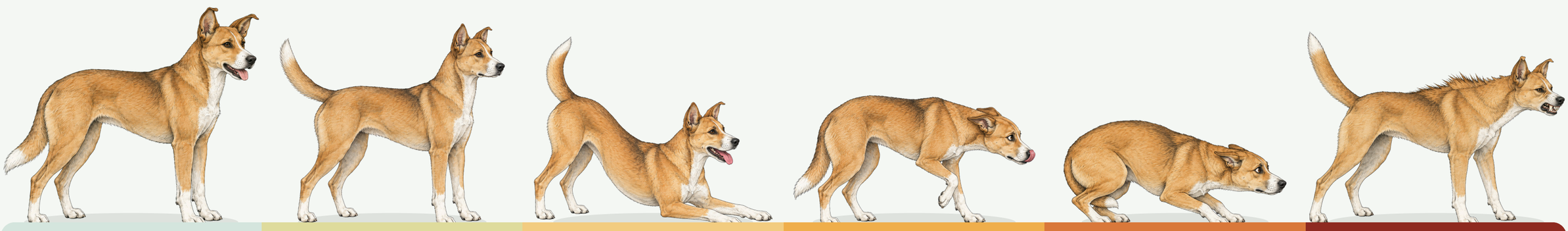
A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING SHELTER PETS
Poster edition · November 2026

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

Relaxed and at ease.
Fine to say hello, if they come to you.

EYES soft, a normal shape

MOUTH relaxed, open or closed

BODY loose; tail at its natural height

[4]

Alert

Interested, assessing.
Pause. Let them look first.

EARS up and forward

MOUTH closed

BODY still and tall, weight forward

[5]

Playful

An invitation to play.
Keep it gentle and short, with breaks.

BOW front end down, rear end up

MOUTH open and relaxed

BODY bouncy; swaps roles

[4, 6, 7]

Stressed

Uneasy.
Stop what you are doing. Give room.

EYES whale eye, or looking away

MOUTH lip licks, yawns

BODY head lowered; paw lift

[3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]

Fearful

Wants to get away.
Back off. Never corner, reach or lean over.

EARS flattened back

TAIL tucked between the legs

BODY crouched, head low

[5, 8, 10]

Warning

A clear request for space.
Stop. Move away calmly, and don't stare back.

EYES a hard, direct stare

MOUTH teeth bared; growl, snap

BODY stiff and still; hackles may rise

[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

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.

Corrections: hello@petnecto.com