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A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING SHELTER PETS
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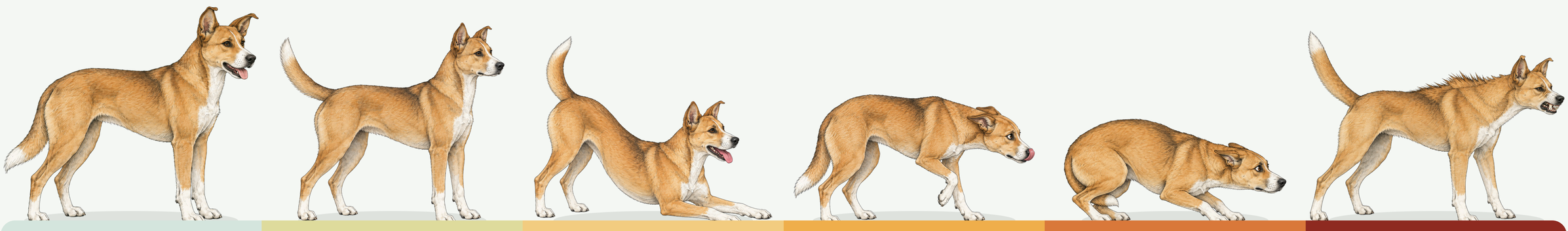
Dog body language

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]



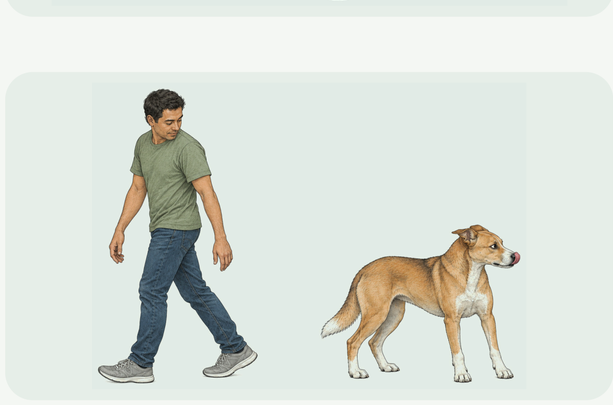
1. Let the dog come to you and sniff your hand.



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.

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