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A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING SHELTER PETS

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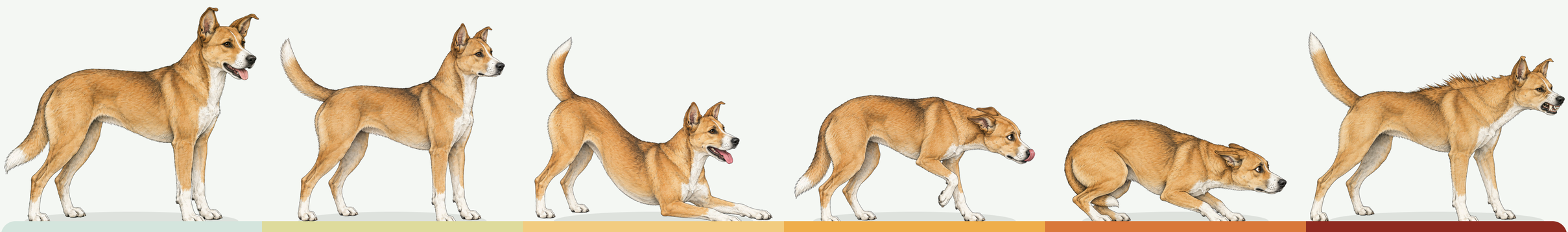
# Dog body language

## 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.

**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