



# Canine Communication

## Introduction

Dogs communicate with each other and with us *all the time* through their body language. Dogs usually understand each other and can recognise very subtle signals that we all too often miss.

Most people who work with dogs and have some knowledge of their body language feel that many dog bites could have been prevented if people were able to spot the 'early warning signals'.

So many dog attack articles report that 'the dog was always good with children' or that 'the bite was unprovoked'. Most canine behaviourists would agree that very few bites are really 'unprovoked' and dogs who sit quietly in the corner are not dogs who are 'good with children. The dog who voluntarily approaches children with a relaxed wagging tail, wiggly body, relaxed open mouth and soft eyes, is a dog who genuinely enjoys seeing children - anything less is mere tolerance.

Most reported dog bites are on children by dogs they know. This is a terrible situation for both children and dogs, especially when at least some could be easily prevented. We all know that children shouldn't be left alone with dogs but most of the time that children get bitten is when an adult is there.

The problem is that adults need to know how to spot when a dog is stressed, early enough to do something about it.

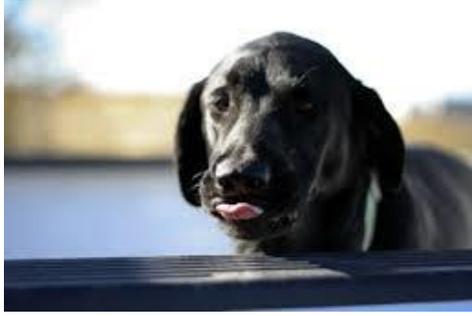
## How to Tell if a Dog is Anxious

There are many reasons why it's important to recognise anxiety in dogs:

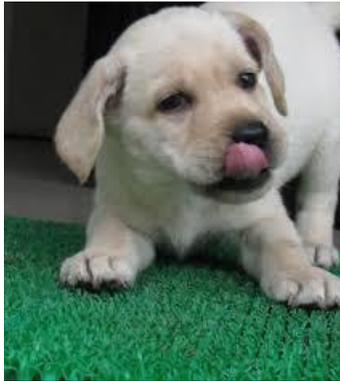
- Stress is a universal underlying cause of aggression.
- Stress can have a negative impact on the dog's health.
- The dog's ability to learn is impaired when he is stressed.
- Dogs respond poorly to training when stressed.
- You will need the understanding if you are working with dogs in any capacity.

For all of these reasons, and more, it is so important to learn to 'read' dogs for signs of anxiety; here are a few of the more common indicators:

- Moving in slow motion, often seen when one dog meets another or when a dog is anxious about his owner's behaviour.
- Lip licking: dogs often lick their lips or flick their tongues up towards their noses when they are stressed. This is hard to spot but if your dog does this, you will get better at spotting it with practise.



*Lip/nose licking - often happens so quickly that it's hardly noticeable.*



*Puppies 'lip-lick' a lot because the world is new and stressful to them*



*This child and dog need separating quickly.*

- Rolling over onto his back is not just about having his tummy scratched. This is appeasement behaviour that puppies offer other dogs and people often re-enforce it by rubbing their tummies. However in adult dogs the meaning of this behaviour needs careful observation of the wider context because it could mean that the dog wants his tummy tickled or it could mean that he is extremely stressed.



*You can tell this dog is stressed and not wanting his tummy rubbed because the whites of his eyes are showing too*

- Turning his head away, averting his eyes: if your dog does this when training, check out your own body language and voice control.



*With another dog he is saying 'I'm not a threat' or 'I don't like your behaviour'.*

- Avoidance: Dog turns away, shuts down, evades handler's touch and treats. Back off and encourage the dog to you, if he doesn't want to - leave him be.
- Facial ridges: Furrows or muscle ridges appear in dog's forehead and around eyes and muzzle. This may be seen in dogs at the end of a training class when they are tired by all the stimulation. This is easy to spot in Retriever and Labrador puppies but will take more skill to spot in patterned or hairier breeds.



*Look at the lines and ridges in this Labrador's face; he is carrying tension in the muscles.*

- Digestive disturbances: Vomiting and diarrhoea can be a sign of illness, or of stress; the digestive system reacts strongly to stress. Car-sickness is often a stress reaction.
- Yawning: dogs often yawn when they are worried by what goes on around them, arguments in the family home, not understanding what is required when training and so forth. Look for yawning when your dog shouldn't normally be tired and there are stressors in the environment. Some dogs yawn through 'positive' stress (eustress), like being excited about going out for a walk.



*Yawning is used by dogs as a calming signal from the time they are born, and you will often see it in puppies when they are picked up.*



- Shaking (as if wet, but dog is dry). As though the dog is trying to shake the stress away. Often seen after a stressful encounter/event.
- Lowered body posture: "Slinking" or acting "guilty" or "sneaky" (all misinterpretations of dog body language) can be indicators of stress.
- 'Whale eye' or 'half moon eyes' where you can see the whites of the dog's eyes.



- Mouthing: Willingness to use mouth on human skin - can be puppy exploration or adult poor manners, but can also be an expression of stress, ranging from gentle nibbling (flea biting), to hard taking of treats, to painfully hard mouthing, snapping, or biting.
- Panting: rapid shallow or heavy breathing - normal if the dog is warm or has just been exercising but can be a sign of stress in the dog who is not physically exerting himself or is over-warm.
- Stiff movement: tension can cause a noticeable stiffness in leg, body, and tail movements.
- Freezing: dogs often freeze when on the vets' examination table or if another dog approaches that they are unsure of or if people approach their food

bowl. Freezing can be a precursor to an escalation in the situation so take care with dogs that freeze around children - get the child to back off slowly and quietly and allow the dog to relax.

All of these and many, many more can happen long before a dog growls or bites. When they are capable of giving of this many stress signals is it any wonder they bite when they have all been ignored? That must be the equivalent of complaining several times by phone, e-mail and letter and being ignored before storming round to the shop or slamming down the phone!

### Reading Suggestions

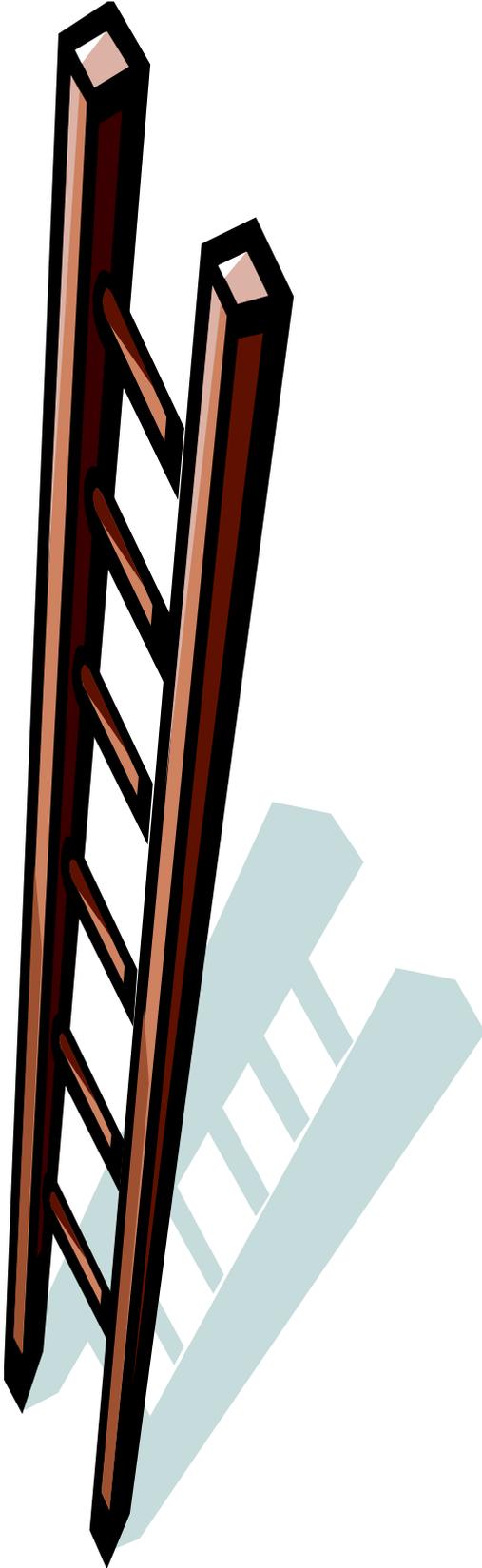
[On Talking Terms With Dogs-Calming-Signals](#) by Turid Rugaas

[Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide](#) by Brenda Aloff

## The Ladder of Aggression

From "The Canine Commandments" by  
Kendal Shepherd

The following is a general guide to how dogs behave under increasing stress but all dogs are different and will display different patterns to this example.



1. Biting
2. Growling
3. Snapping
4. Stiffening up, staring
5. Lying down, leg up
6. Standing crouched, tail tucked under
7. Creeping, ears back
8. Walking away
9. Turning body away, sitting, pawing
10. Turning head away
11. Yawning, blinking, nose licking

Study your own dog and learn their personal signals. Note in particular that apart from when a dog is snapping or biting their mouths usually close in response to stress (apart from when they may need to pant as well of course). A closed mouth is usually a sign on its own that a dog is anxious.



- Turid Rugaas