



Canine Fundamentals: Body Language & Communication

WEBINAR SCRIPT

I'm Alana Stevenson. I'm an animal behaviorist and I help clients humanely train their dogs and resolve behavioral problems. I use a positive approach when working with animals and do not follow a dominance methodology or use aversives. This webinar is on dog body-language. Pictures and videos are presented so you can understand how dogs behave and interact with each other. I also go over how to greet dogs and why our body-language is so important.

One thing to be familiar with is the 'oppositional reflex.' A number of animals have it. This means that any push or pull on a dog will cause the dog to push or pull back in response. We often confuse the oppositional reflex with the dog being obstinate or stubborn. The classic image of a person pulling on the donkey or mule and the donkey pulling back in response is an example of the oppositional reflex. The donkey is not being stubborn. The person is creating the behavior. The more the person pulls, the more upset and resistant the donkey becomes. Dogs behave this way on leash. Tug of war, play-biting and wrestling, pulling on leash, dogs pulling a sled and physical prompting, which is when we push or physically maneuver a dog into a sit, for instance, will elicit the oppositional reflex.

The two pictures show a dog's oppositional reflex on leash. Most people have experienced this. Even subtle or minor tugs can cause the dog to stop, be resistant and lean back. In the next two videos, you'll see both Mila & Hobbes not wanting to walk in the lobby. The moment they are tugged and pulled with the leash, they immediately resist and lean back.

This is one reason to avoid tense and tight leashes. Instead of pulling on your dog, if your dog stops and resists, step closer to your dog, turn your shoulders away from your dog and in the direction you want your dog to go and wait. Keep the leash relaxed. With a little patience, dogs will often follow or approach as demonstrated in the following video.

Jumping is a behavior that is misunderstood. It is common in puppies and adolescent dogs. Jumping is not a dominant gesture. It is a juvenile and infantile behavior. It is submissive and attention-seeking. Dogs will jump on greetings and to appease each other as well. Dogs will jump up to solicit, show

deference, when they are worried or concerned and to seek reassurance. The more we are reactive or get upset when dogs jump on us, the more anxious the dogs may become and the more frequently they'll jump.

Although play-biting isn't directly connected to body-language, it is a behavior that is frequently misinterpreted or misunderstood. The next two videos show normal puppy behavior. There are ways we can handle play-biting that are not in this webinar, but play-biting will decrease with age.

How dogs greet each other can reveal their intentions. When you observe dogs greet each other and are friendly, they generally don't approach each other straight on. Instead, they approach on a curve. When one dog approaches and sniffs the other, the other dog angles his or her face or body away slightly. They position themselves so they remain at an angle or parallel or perpendicular to each other. In the photos, the dogs are demonstrating perpendicular body-language.

In addition, when dogs show friendly body-language, their eyes will be soft, and they will look at each other but not stare. In other words, they look at each other and glance away again. If dogs stare at each other directly, they will either then play or fight.

These images show friendly body-language.

If dogs look at each other directly, as this girl is looking at her dog, they will either fight or play-fight. A dog will interpret our direct staring and face front body-language as a way to initiate a direct interaction. When we face dogs and stare at them, we are saying 'Bring it on.' That could be good or bad depending on a dog's emotional state. This is why fearful dogs will snap at strangers when they approach them or reach their hands directly towards them. It's also when dogs will jump on people or submissively pee.

Often when dogs are friendly, if we look at them or face them directly, they will look away or briefly turn away from us. If we turn our back to a dog and look over our shoulder – as the little dog in the bottom photo, we are either inviting the dog to come or checking in to see what is happening. Dogs who are timid often approach people when they bend down and turn away from them as you'll see later. But they'll retreat and avoid us if we face them directly.

When dogs turn their back to each other, they are signaling that they are done, finished or busy. They are no longer interested in interacting. Dogs interpret the same signal when we turn our backs to them. We are signaling that we are busy or no longer interested in engaging.

When dogs avoid eye-contact entirely or only give fleeting glances, they are trying to avoid interactions and to prevent conflict. Other dogs tend not to engage or interact with dogs who don't look at them. There is a difference between looking and staring. All animals are sensitive to staring. Looking lasts under 2.5 or 3 seconds, staring is looking longer than 3 sec. As people, when we talk to each other we bob our heads and add noises such as 'yeah, uh-huh, hmm' and we look away. If we did not do this and just looked at another person, the other person would be uncomfortable after about 3 seconds.

Dogs don't use head-bobbing to communicate, nor do they use verbal confirmations. When being friendly, dogs will look at each other and glance away or glance at each other and look away. They will do this when they're playing as well. If a dog looks at anything longer than 3 seconds, they will likely want to pursue or take action. I call this staring in dogs – fixating.

The 2-3 second rule and fixating is important to know if you have a dog who is reactive. When a dog chases squirrels, birds, or cats, barks or lunges at other dogs, or bites, you often have a short window to interrupt the stare. If you don't, the dog will react after about 3 seconds.

Another look that dogs may give, especially if they are wary, is the 'side eye.' They awkwardly turn their head away to avoid conflict, yet at the same time, they directly stare at the other individual. Generally, you'll have a 2-3 second window before the dog will react, likely, with a moment of aggression. It's important if you see this look to back off.

The next video is of a dog who was very wary and defensive when someone approached directly when in his crate. This dog's reaction was also triggered by the person's close proximity, direct eye-contact and direct approach.

How can you tell the difference between dogs playing or fighting? When dogs play with each other, they will directly stare at each other but they will also show play bows, prancing and paw taps. During play dogs will angle their face or body away from each other. They will maintain parallel or perpendicular body language. Both dogs want to participate. They'll attack each other, but then retreat or dash away again. They'll take turns being the aggressor. They will also take breaks during play.

Here we have classic play posturing. In the left photo, we have a young puppy jumping at the older dog. The older dog happily turns his back to the puppy but looks around at her over his shoulder. The upper right photo shows dogs chasing each other and biting at each other, but they're doing so maintaining parallel body language. They're also exhibiting along paw taps and prancing. In the bottom right photo, the dogs are wrestling but their faces are angled away from each other. They maintain perpendicular body language and the puppy's mouth is wide open.

These shepherds in the upper left photo are playing with each other. They are attacking while standing or remaining next to each other and their mouths are wide open. The German shepherd in the upper right photo is harassing the cat. The cat is defensive, but the shepherd is not being aggressive or intentionally wanting to hurt the cat. The shepherd is turning away from the cat, looking away from the cat, and her mouth is wide open. In the bottom two photos, we see two dogs maintaining perpendicular body language. In the left photo, we see paw taps and prancing and, in the right photo, we see play bows as well as attacking and retreating.

When play turns to fighting, you will see the potential warning signs. Dogs will maintain too much face to face or chest to chest contact. One dog will regularly retreat, avoid the other dog which also means avoids eye-contact or cowers around the other dog.

There is what I call the 'broken record syndrome.' This is where one dog continually faces and lunges or attacks the other dog, repeating the same pattern over and over again. The dog might continually attack another dog's ears or ankles. The dog on the receiving end will try to get away or avoid play in this context.

The growl itself does not indicate whether a dog is playing or fighting. Some dogs can be quite growly in play. However, an escalation of the growling usually indicates that play is getting out of hand or one dog is having enough.

Dogs can be more aggressive and reactive on leash. When dogs are on leash we approach each other directly when we have dogs meet. We keep the leashes tight and we prevent the dogs from interacting in a way to prevent conflict. Dogs are often forced into a head lock and leashes can get tangled. Because dogs can't show correct or friendly body-language on leash and avoid confrontation, leash interactions often turn into fighting and one dog may want to retreat but can't.

The two photos show dogs interacting. The left photo shows two dogs approaching each other. One dog is being friendlier than the other. That is the dog to left. He is approaching the other dog on a curve and exaggerating the angling of his body. The dog on the right approaches more directly, is bit stiff, and you may see that his hackles are up. This is where the hair stands up on the back. This is called piloerection. The photo on the right shows a Boston terrier who is hesitant upon meeting two white dogs. She faces the white dogs directly, is stiff, and her hackles are up on her hind end which indicates fear or arousal, no different than when the hair stands up at the back of our neck. The little white dogs sense the terrier's apprehension. The dog on the far left avoids eye-contact while the other white dog tentatively sniffs the terrier but approaches at an angle.

In the next video, you'll see a dog turn her back when other dogs approach. She was indicating that she did not want to interact or engage with them. The other dogs eventually gave up and left her alone. To show friendly body-language to dogs, we can angle our face or body slightly and stand or kneel parallel or perpendicular to them. Our eyes should be friendly, kind and soft. We should look at the dog but not stare. This means we should look at the dog but then we should glance away again.

You can smile at dogs. Some people think that smiling at a dog means you are growling at the dog or the dog will interpret it that way. If you maintain friendly body-language and have soft friendly eyes, a smile will show you are friendly. Most dogs' eyes will soften and they wag their tails when you smile at them. For dogs who are anxious, timid or fearful, it is helpful if you kneel down and angle away from them. It's also important to avert your gaze. You should reward the anxious or fearful dog for approaching you. For aggressive dogs, it's important that you move slowly and avert your gaze. The top photo shows a woman on a greeting showing friendly body-language. If this dog was fearful, timid, and hesitant to approach, it would be better to kneel down and angle away from the dog without directly looking at her as in the bottom picture. Sometimes, it's important to make no eye-contact at all. If you stare at a dog who is fearful, they may back up, retreat and bark at you.

When touching dogs, it is best to touch them from under or behind their head and on their chest instead of reaching over them or on top of the head. You should pet the dogs on the side of their body closest to you, instead of reaching at them or directly over them. We tend to want to lean over dogs, reach for them and throw our arms around them. For dogs who are fearful, this can feel threatening or be overwhelming. For clipping on leashes and putting on or taking off harnesses, stand or position yourself next to the dog and reach under the dog's head and torso as opposed to facing and looming over the dog from above. Here are examples of friendly body-language. In the upper two photos, the women are positioned next to or beside the dogs and petting them from behind or under the head. Most dogs are better with each other and with strangers when they walk parallel to each other or in a group, as in the bottom left photo. The bottom right photo shows a good position if you want a dog to approach but to not feel threatened.

If you maintain this angle, you can bend down to encourage the dog to come to you as well.

Here we have children with dogs. Many dogs don't like children. How children behave around dogs can dramatically affect the dog's behavior. Most dogs are good when walking with children and when

children are next to them. When children are sitting or lying down, dogs will often approach them from the side – as in the upper right and lower left photos. The bottom photo shows body-language that can be offsetting or be intimidating to a dog. The dog is lying down while both children face and stare at the dog directly and one child pets the dog on top of the head.

These two photos show the way most children and adults greet dogs. Dogs may cower, retreat or become aggressive in response. Instead, these children should stand or kneel next to the dog and pet the dog from behind the dog's head and on the back or shoulders. If they present their hand to the dog, they should position their side to the dog as they do so. Ideally, the dog should voluntarily approach them as well.

In the next video, we have Mila who is timid when greeting children. The children approach Mila directly and reach over her head. Although she tried, Mila was on the leash and so she couldn't get away. If the children turned their sides to her as she approached them, she would have been more confident and friendlier in her greeting.

If the dog is happy or content, you will see a relaxed expression. The mouth will be relaxed or open and the lips, eyes and face will be soft.

The dog's pupils will be normal and her body, neck, tail and ears will be relaxed. Dogs who are fearful or worried will have a flat or closed mouth, their face will be tense, their ears will be back, they often have a wrinkled brow and their pupils may be dilated.

Here are a few more images. As you can see, this worried or stressed look is a universal expression in dogs who are anxious. The mouth is closed tight, the ears are back, they can have a furrowed brow and dilated pupils.

In addition, stressed or anxious dogs may lower their body or cower and tuck their tail. Their muscles will be stiff or tense. Sometimes they'll move slowly to avoid confrontation. Anxious or stressed dogs may also pant or pace.

In addition to the previously mentioned signals, dogs who are anxious will look or turn their face away from an individual and avoid eye-contact. They do this to diffuse a situation and avoid conflict, as the two photos show. Some dogs may 'pretend' to sniff the ground as way to avoid a person or another dog. Some submissive and fearful dogs will cower and roll onto their back as we pet them. These dogs aren't being confident and simply wanting belly rubs. They may be trying to avoid an altercation.

Here we have dogs looking and turning away to avoid confrontation. When people miss these signals, dogs can become more anxious and we can, unintentionally, put them in situations they are not comfortable with.

The above shelter dog is looking to the left and right to avoid the camera and the person standing in front of her. The bottom two photos show the same behavior. The dogs are avoiding the camera – the person behind the camera – and showing deferential and anxious behavior.

Look at the dog in the upper left photo. You see the same expressions in the two photos with children. The children are being friendly. The dogs are uncomfortable and looking away.

Growling is a normal dog behavior. It's important to not punish a dog for growling. Growling is a warning signal used to prevent conflict. Dogs may show deferential or anxious body-language as they growl as the bulldog does in the following video. If a dog growls at you, you should back off and reassess the situation to find out what triggered the dog.

If a dog lifts a paw or front leg, it can indicate that the dog is hesitant or unsure. This is not the same as the dog pawing at you for attention or giving you the paw to shake. It is a deferential behavior and often corresponds with anxiety. Some dogs may lift their front paw when you positively train them but they don't yet understand the exercise. Once they understand the exercise, they become more confident and the behavior disappears. In these pictures, these dogs are trying to prevent conflict. They are looking away, lifting their paw, and are worried and anxious.

In this photo, we have a puppy who is friendly, but hesitant and shy. Notice the ears, cowering and paw lift. The next video is from a client who thought his dog was being stubborn. But the dog was actually trying to appease and calm the owner.

Two other communication signals are lip licking and yawning. Dogs may lick their lips when they are nervous or worried. Yawning can be a mild stress signal or displacement behavior. Dogs may yawn as they wait at a door to be let outside or if a person takes too long to give a cookie as their dog patiently sits. They may yawn during or following punishment, strict walks, after or during hugs or when having their picture taken.

Thank you for taking this webinar on dog body language. I go over body language and positive dog training in my books, *The Right Way the First Time* and *Training your Dog the Humane Way*. *The Right Way the First Time* can be ordered through my website. *Training Your Dog the Humane Way* is available on Amazon.

If you have any questions on dog or cat behavior, you can contact me through my website (alanastevenson.com) or by email at alana@alanastevenson.com.



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