

# CANINE COMMUNICATION



CANiNe  
tRAiNiNg  
PARTNERS

# **What is My Dog Saying?**

**Canine Communication 101**  
**CD version**



**Shifting weight conveys intent**

Carol A. Byrnes, CPDT ~ Diamonds in the Ruff

## Communication signals are designed to:

- Create distance.
- Decrease distance.
- Express politeness, show friendliness, resolve conflict
- Express fear, reluctance or discomfort.
- Express joy!



Rocking horse gait and big smiles – these are happy dogs! 5



**When humans think “body language” we tend to focus on what the ears and tail are saying. We listen for the growl or bark. But these are only a tiny piece of the canine communication ballet.**

## Dogs speak with their bodies They communicate through:

- Facial Expression
- Tail & ear carriage
- Posture
- Vocalizations  
Barking, whining, growling, howling



**But that's not all ...**

# A dog signals intent and stress level in many ways:

In this presentation you will see examples of:

- Weight shift
- Blinking, licking,
- yawning, sniffing
- Looking – or not looking.
- Pupil dilation
- Corners of mouth
- Posture, tenseness of face/body muscles
- Bend of elbow
- Respiration rate
- Speed and direction of movement



The most **SUBTLE** body language signals carry great meaning.

- An almost imperceptible shift of weight
- Change in breathing
- Tenseness of muscles
- Squinting eyes, blinking

**A few ‘words’ in a sentence of dog language.**

# **Thin slicing**

*"The power of the trained mind to make split second decisions, the ability to think without thinking, in other words using instinct or intuition based on the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and people based on very narrow 'slices' of experience." – Malcom Gladwell*

**“Words” of canine communication happen in clusters - “paragraphs” of information like dance moves, flowing from sender to receiver and back.**

**By focusing in on individual aspects of behavior, we can teach the eye to see the important information and disregard the unimportant.**

**We'll start with the most familiar canine communication tool: The Tail!**



# THE TAIL

## a barometer of mood



A tail wag isn't just a measure of "how friendly" a dog is!



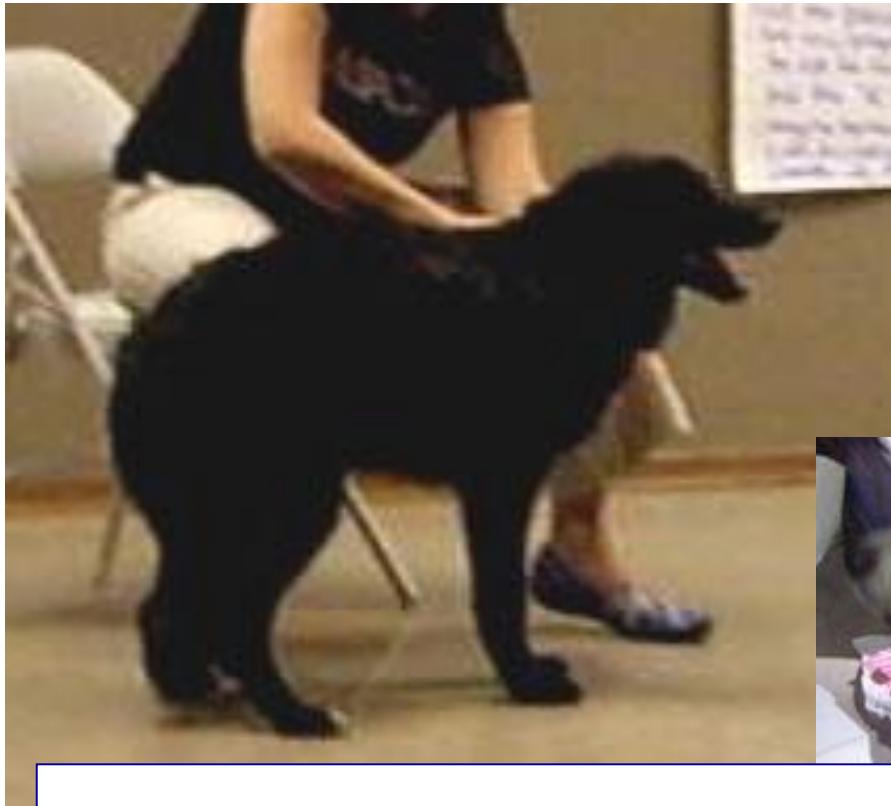
The level, speed and tension  
give clues to how the dog is feeling:



- High alert
  - Fearful
  - Neutral
  - Ambivalent
  - Uncertain
  - Excited
  - Aroused
- and yes --
- Happy



# Tucked Tail



**What signs of stress do you see?**

- ears back
- tail clamped
- back rounded
- stress panting



**These dogs may look "sorry" or "guilty" but this is merely an appeasing posture designed to diffuse your aggressive tone or invasive posture.**

# THE EYES HAVE IT!

## Looking -versus- Not Looking

- **Eye contact is engaging**  
– direct communication between the looker and the lookee.

**Relaxed, squinty eye contact** with loose, full body wag is generally friendly interest or an attempt to connect socially. Distance decreasing

**Hard eye contact** - a direct unblinking stare with still, forward posture - could be a challenge or a threat. Distance increasing

**A whale-eyed stare** can be alarm or a warning of an impending bite – watch for short lips vs. long lips, facial tension, posture, high tail vs. low tail. Distance increasing

- **Looking away**  
- a cut-off signal, a calming signal, or even a status signal.

**Glancing away** briefly during greeting overtures. Calming signal / distance decreasing

**Looking away with chin up**, as if looking at something more interesting, can be disinterest -cut-off signal or dismissal -status signal.

**Averting eyes with head lowered**, ears back, blinking, lip licking.  
C-shape posture might be discomfort or shyness. Stress / calming signal.

## **Squinty and soft**

**Friendly, trusting, engaging**

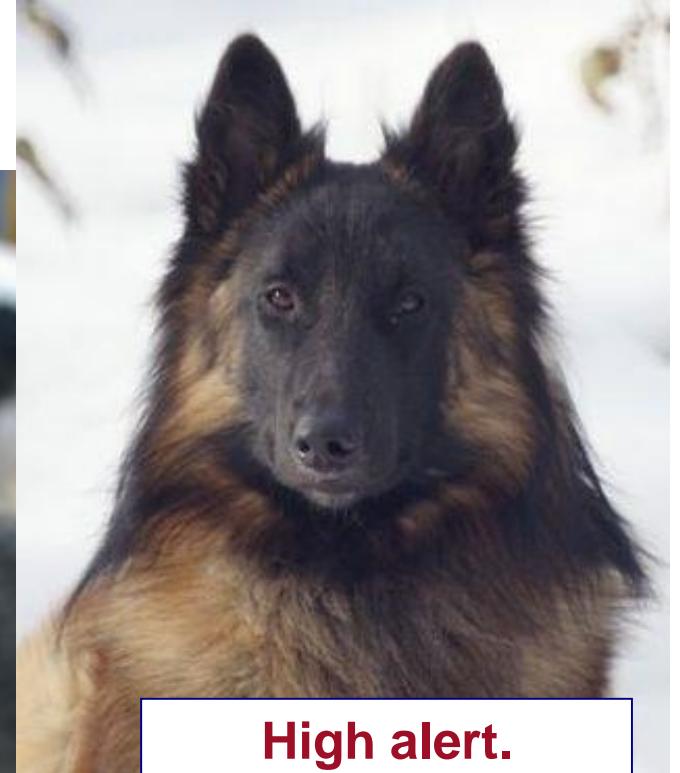


# **Mouth open, jaw relaxed, eyes soft.**

- **relaxed**
- **confident**
- **open**
- **friendly**
- **approachable**



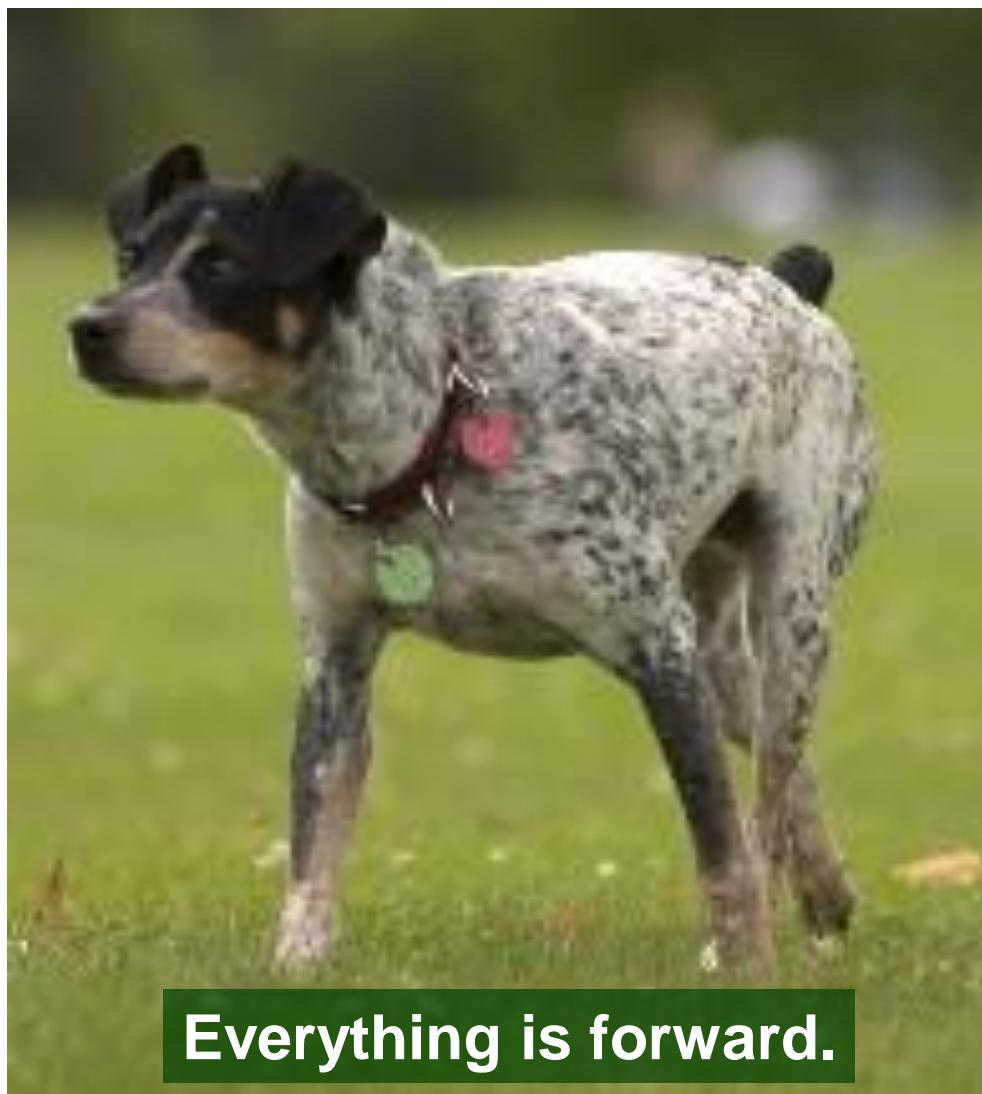
## **Tipped head** curiosity and interest



**High alert.  
Mouth closed.  
Ears pricked.  
Alert, air scenting.  
Interested.  
Focused, calm.  
Watchful.**

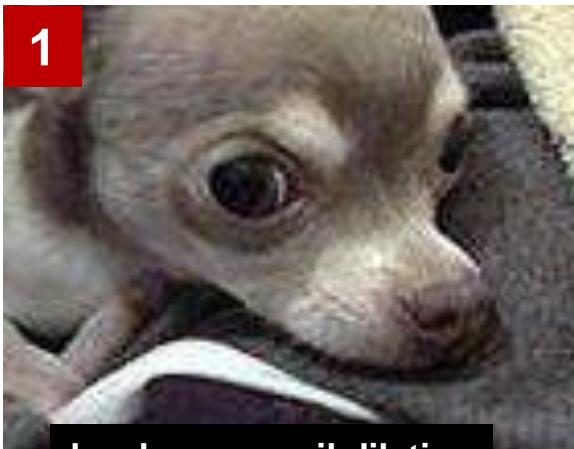
**Eyes and facial muscles soft.**

**A direct, straight-on approach with strong eye contact is confrontational.**





We know that staring is intimidating.  
Note exaggerated look-away.



hard eye - pupil dilation

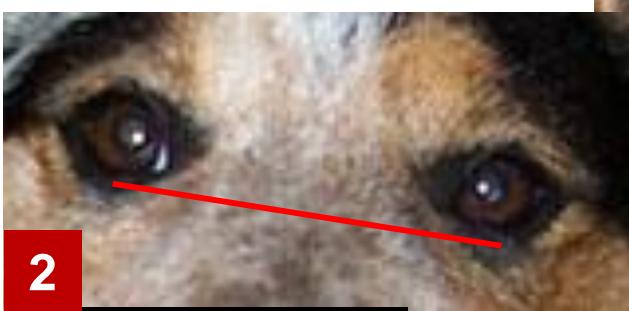
## Hard eye, soft eye, or ?



squinty, soft



unblinking stare



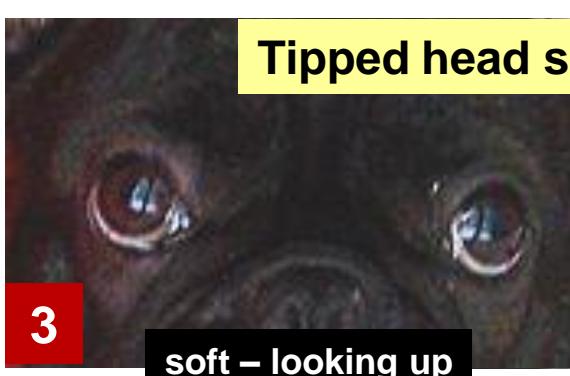
soft, tipped head



whale eye



pupil dilation, whale eye



soft – looking up



open & direct



Hard - pupil dilation, direct stare

Tipped head shows friendly interest

# Looking away

**Calming signal.**

Taking a break  
to calm down. >



**Cut-off signal**  
– distance increasing.  
< An uncomfortable first meeting.  
**Brown dog looks away from white dog's approach. What do you see?**

- slow movements and look-away
- tail tuck
- ears back and high on the skull
- sideways posture, heads lowered
- **bodies in a C-curve**
- paw lift



**Submissive, stressed  
look-away with lip lick.**

**Head lowered, ears back and low on skull,  
eyes squinty, blinking, C-shape.  
“I am no threat.” “I’m uncomfortable.”  
“I need space.”**

## **C-curve look-away**

**Turning head away from threat**

**Appeasement / displacement  
behaviors. Sometimes called  
“Calming signals”**





**Chin up look-away  
a cut-off signal  
expresses dismissal, lack of interest.**



**The canine version.**

Dogs understand us better when we use their language.

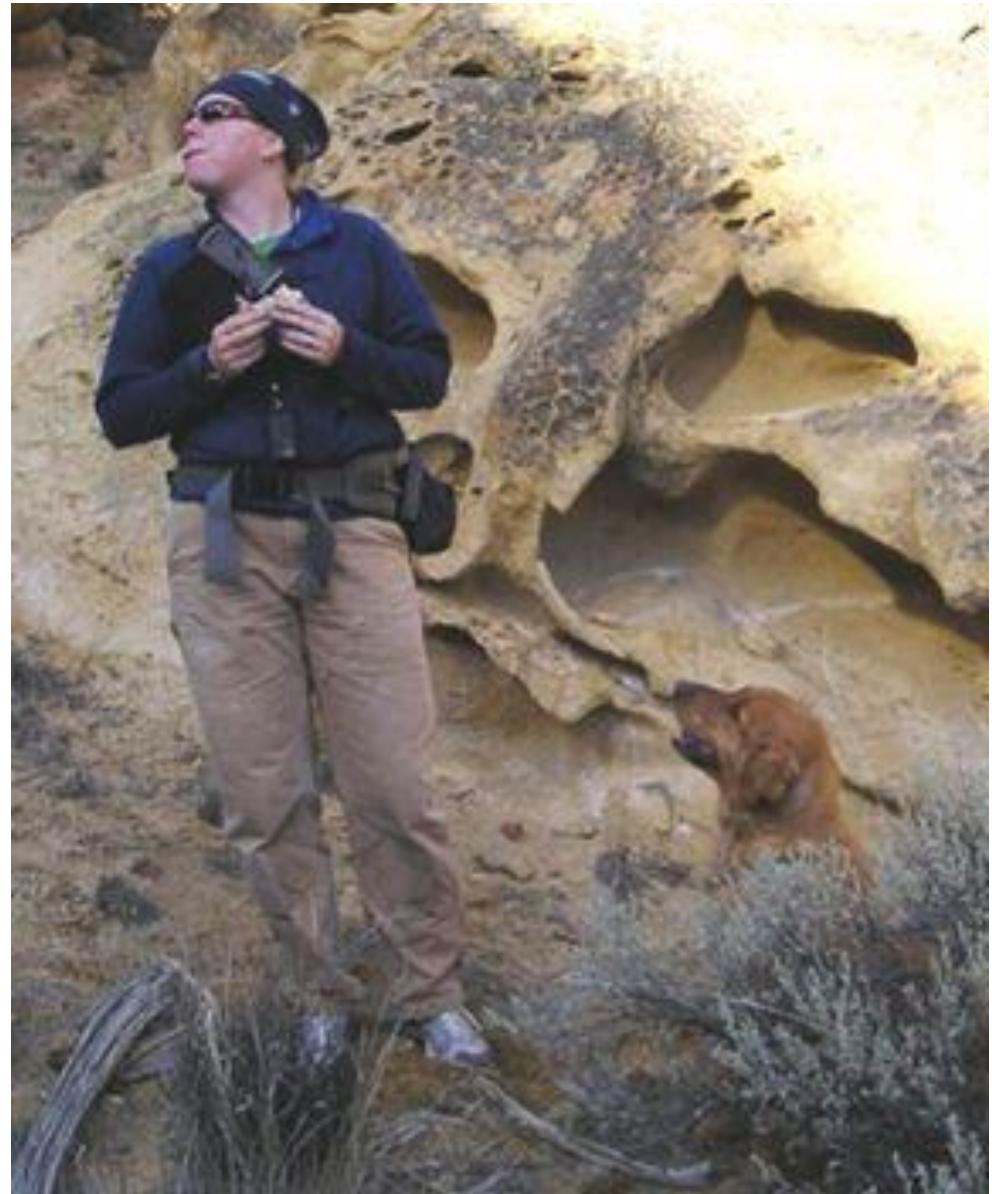
**The human version.**

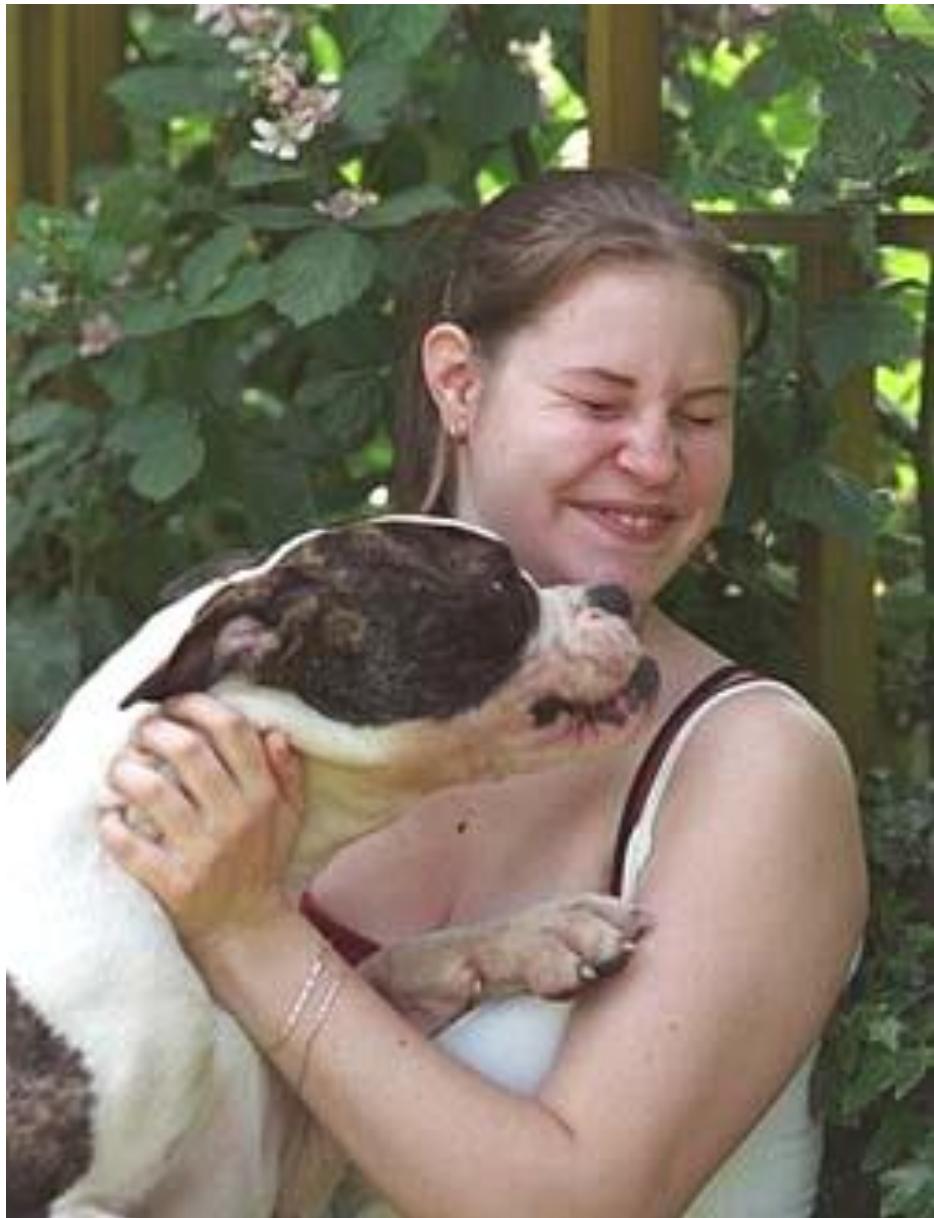
**“No, you  
may not  
have my  
sandwich.”**

**A demonstrative  
look-away freeze  
is a cut-off signal.**

Withdrawing all attention  
says to the dog,  
“I’m not interested.”

If looking away doesn’t  
work, turning completely  
away will explain it  
more clearly.





This girl might intend to say,  
**“I don’t want to play.”**

**But her  
body language  
says otherwise.**

**What do you see?**

**Bending elbows  
High pitched giggle**

**The pressure of the  
hands pushing the  
dog away increases  
the dog leaning in.**

**It’s as good as a hug.**

# **Peace keeping, conflict resolution**

## **Appeasement, Calming signals, Deference**

- Curving - “C” in posture or direction of travel
- Looking away frequently (shifting eyes or turning head)
- Turning head away, turning completely away
- Blinking, squinty eyes
- Lip lick
- Yawning
- Sniffing the ground
- Weight shift
- Lowering of head / body
- Slowing of movements



**Curving is non-confrontational**

**They work when people use them, too!**

People who understand and use these signals are less likely to be bitten!

## Weight shift

- Caution
- Politeness
- Calming Signal
- Play invitation
- Deference





^ Back and to the right

Lowering of head,  
averting eyes >  
Tail is level, body is soft

### This is deference.

To *defer* is to yield out of respect for or  
in recognition of another's authority.

**Shift of weight,  
Lowering head**

**Signals of politeness**



## Sometimes a play bow is a “calming signal”

- a term coined by Turid Rugaas, Norway



A play bow may be a play invitation - perhaps a signal to the other dog that "the fighting postures we are about to assume, aren't real" – or in these examples, to diffuse conflict or ease tension.

Dog at L. - round eyes, flattened ears, worried expression – a calming signal play bow.  
Dog at R. – bow/stretch. Perhaps this is an “I respect your space” bow or polite greeting behavior. Many dogs greet their owners this way after an absence.

## STRESS SIGNALS



**An exaggerated look-away - sniffing.**

**"No time for you, I must have lost my wallet."**

**Sometimes sniffing is just searching out a smell.**

**But when it is displayed in response to social behavior, it's probably  
a calming signal, cut-off signal or sign of stress / avoidance.**

## **Sniffing is sometimes mistaken for “blowing the handler off ”**

An animal who is experiencing frustration or confusion, or is under pressure to perform but lacks confidence, will often perform “species specific” displacement behaviors – coping mechanisms – which may look to the handler like the dog is stubborn, distracted or disinterested.



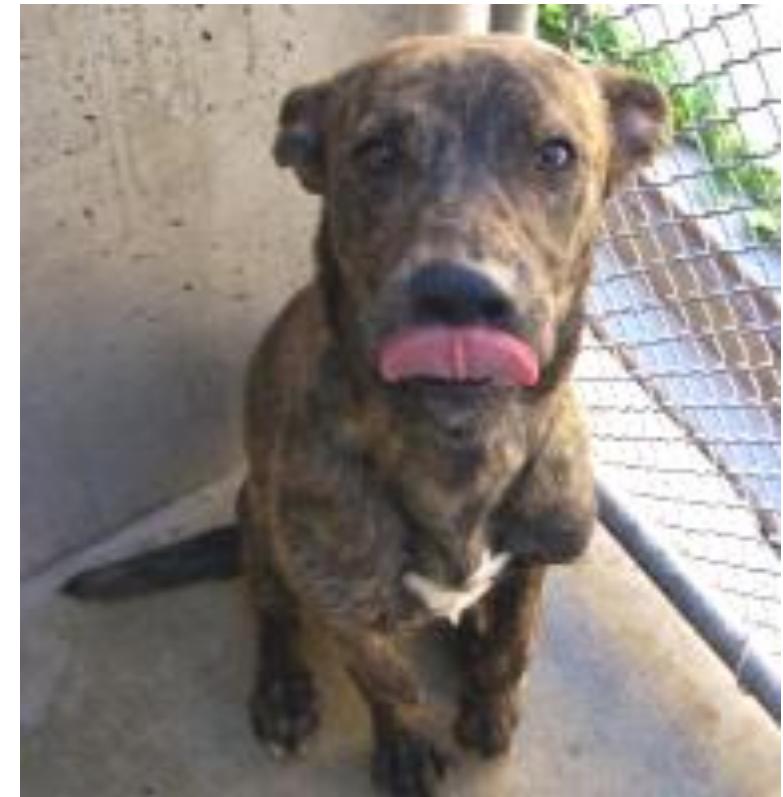
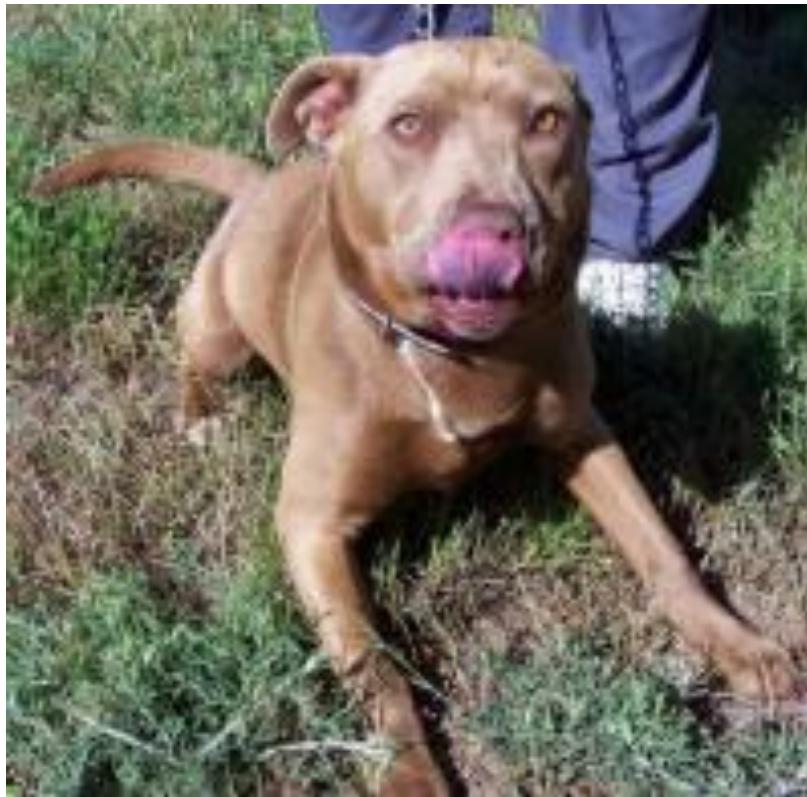
**Feelings of confusion or social pressure often trigger the following response:**

- Looking away
- Turning away
- Slowing down
- Curving
- Sniffing
- Scratching
- Shaking off

**Unfortunately many confused dogs get corrected for being “stubborn or willful.”  
People looming over a sensitive dog exclaim, “Oh, he doesn’t like me!”** 39

## LIP LICK

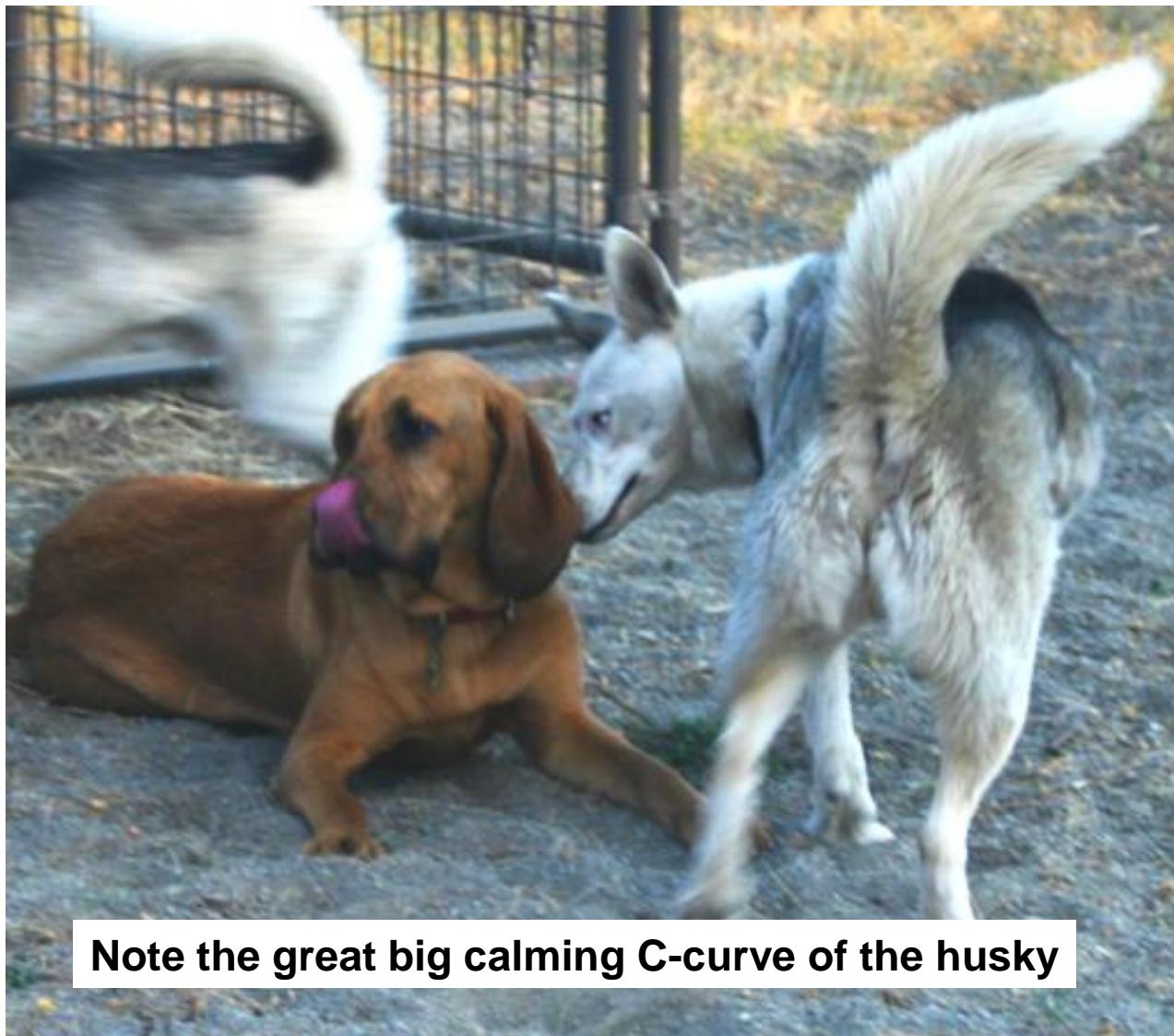
Two mildly stressed dogs – alike, yet different.



**What do you see?**

**How would you adjust your approach given what these dogs are telling you?**

## **Look-away, lip lick**



**Note the great big calming C-curve of the husky**



## **Yawning**

**A measure of  
stress or  
conflict.**



**Sometimes a yawn is just a yawn.**

Tired dogs yawn at the end of a long day.

**But if the yawn is in response to social pressure, it's probably a calming signal.**

It is often observed due to anxiousness, indecision, or conflict.

**A yawn could be considered an exaggerated lip lick.**

**Poodle makes a statement, standing over his prize during a keep-away play session with a toy.  
Pup yawns in response.**





## Paw lift

Lifting a paw in response to social approach might be conflict or insecurity – an **appeasement signal** designed to slow your approach or create space.



Pawing is often a play invitation or social gesture.



It could be to display "I mean you no harm" by deliberately putting itself off balance.

It could be "did you hear that?" In hunting breeds a paw lift is linked to spotting prey.

**It depends on the context and what the rest of the body is doing.**

## **Stress pant – lips drawn back**

**Note round eyes, rapid respiration, pinched ears, trembling, low tail.**

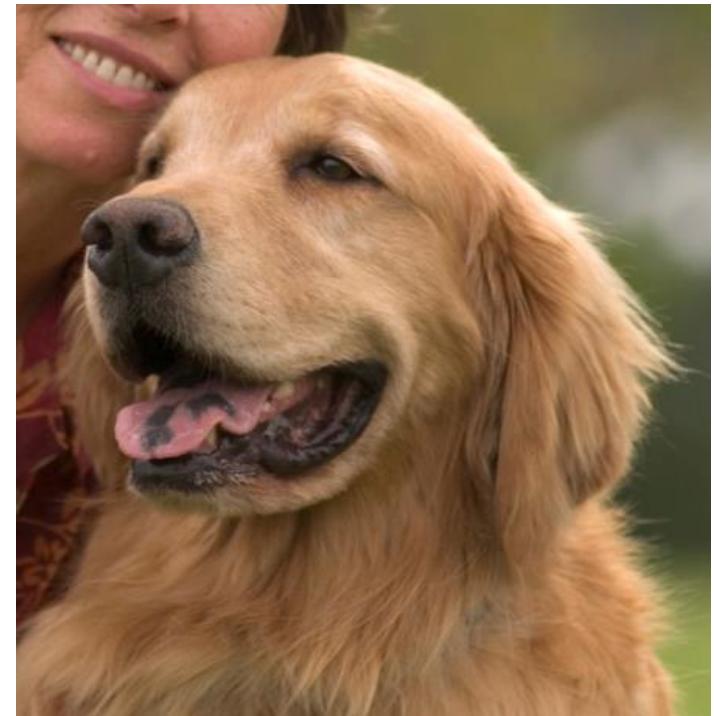


**A stressed dog also blows coat and dander and  
sweats through pads of feet. This behavior could be  
due to fear, anxiety, pain – or impending thunder.**

# **Stress pant vs. non-stressed**



**Eyes large, facial  
muscles tense,  
respiration rapid.**



**Relaxed.  
Facial muscles soft,  
eyes squinty.**

# Corners of the mouth

- Puckered forward – confident agonistic display
- Drawn back – fearful, lacks confidence



The commissure, or corner of the lips, will give you information: whether the dog's reaction is confident or fearful, offensive or defensive.

**Most people interpret this as “I’m going to bite you.”  
Perhaps more accurately, it would be “Don’t make me use these.”**



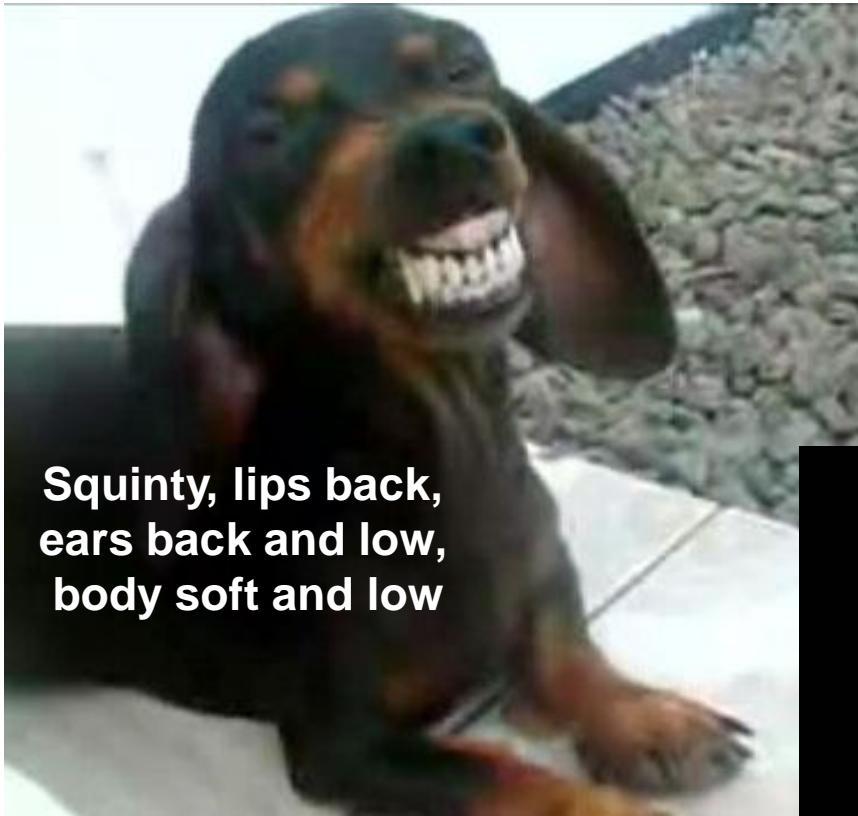
**Confidence - everything is forward, icy calm. Pupils are not dilated.**  
Threat displays such as this are designed to AVOID physical conflict.

# **Submissive grins**



**Squinty eyes,  
ears back, often  
with  
side winding  
body language  
and low, rapidly  
wagging tail,  
sometimes with  
sneezing and  
groveling.**





**Squinty, lips back,  
ears back and low,  
body soft and low**

**How can you tell  
the difference?**

## **Submissive grin vs. snarl**



**Hard eye, tense facial muscles,  
lips and whiskers forward**

## **Hard eye, wrinkles over muzzle, bared teeth**

Protracted warning sequence designed to avoid actual contact.



This dog is not  
enjoying this “game”!

**Any dog, pushed  
too far, can bite.**



## **Hostile exchange.**

Corners of mouth forward, puckered lips, tenseness over forehead, whale eye, pupils dilated, lizard-like tongue *flick* rather than lip lick.

Rigid stance. Defense on left; offense on right.



**There is a whole conversation going on here.**



**What do you see?**

## The trouble with tight leashes

The tight leashes exaggerate and complicate the meeting.



Notice the difference in the intensity of the greeting in the above photo compared to the one at left.

The leashes are relaxed and so are the dogs.

# ROAD RAGE!

A tight leash adds overall muscle tension and raises the dog's posture.

This leads to leash frustration and escalation in bold dogs.



The inability to escape increases feelings of vulnerability.

This increases the likelihood of a defensive outburst in shy dogs.

Rocking back, ears back – he may look fierce, but this dog is afraid!





**Pup at right solicits attention  
by licking adult dog's mouth.  
This can also be a sign of deference.  
Pups often initiate play by  
chewing on ears or jowls.**

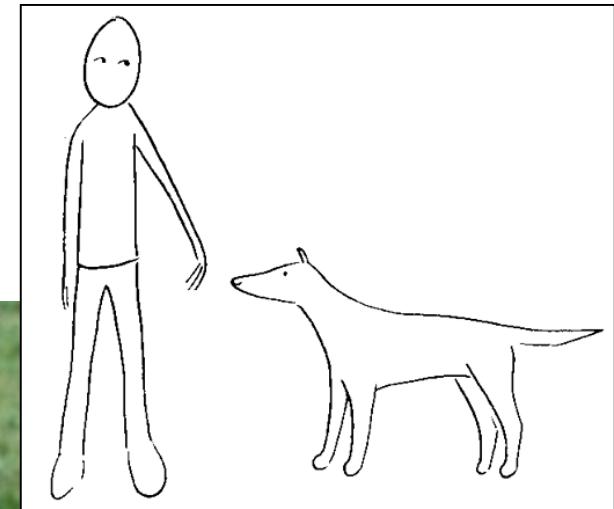
## Introductions.

**The safest  
introductions are  
side-by-side,  
not straight on.**



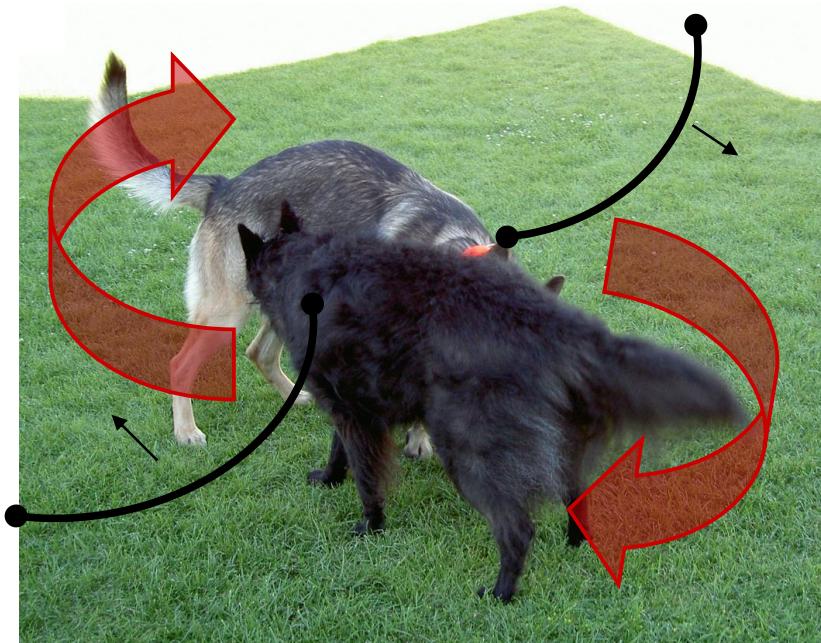
# Presentation for Smelling

## A polite introduction



- Shoulder & cheek presentation
- Soft, squinty eyes
- Weight shifted away

Keep leash slack. Stay even with dog's shoulder.



**Curving,  
cheek presentation**

Avoiding direct  
eye contact, moving  
slowly, circling.

**First name, last name.**

Nose to tail is  
proper greeting etiquette.

< If on leash, handlers must be  
prepared to circle with the dogs.



The higher the tail, the higher the arousal. 60



## Cheek to cheek

### What's wrong with this picture?

The tight leash is drawing the dog on the left into the other dog's space.

If kept “talking” too long, there could be a defensive explosion and no way for the handler to get the dogs out of the situation safely.

For optimal safety, handler should loosen the leash and quietly move behind dog to a position even with dog's right shoulder.



## ENGAGING PLAY

The classic play bow

**Let's party!**  
Rear higher than front,  
elbows bent.

The bend in the elbow is an  
extremely important message.



## In healthy play, role reversal is frequent.

- Bekoff & Allen - 1998



**He is not pinned down, he fell down of his own accord.**

Note curving posture of both dogs.

## **Submissive posture is offered, not forced.**



**Dogs fall down, assuming the lower role, voluntarily.  
If pushed and pinned, they are being bullied, not submissive.**

**Healthy pack order is maintained through active appeasement and control of resources, not intimidation.**



**Generally it's the 'wannabe' dog, not the top dog, who struts around making the biggest threat displays.**

- Leaders don't become leaders by being bullies.
- Leaders just "are" – they have presence and confidence.
- The leader is the one with the choice. He may choose to share, or not.

## Predatory stalk – herding

You might see this posture in play, right before the ambush!



Low head, lowered body, fixed eye,  
slow, calculated movements.

*Predatory sequence: stalk, chase, capture, kill, dissect, consume.*  
*Hunting behavior is an abbreviated sequence – just stalk/chase.*

# Play drive

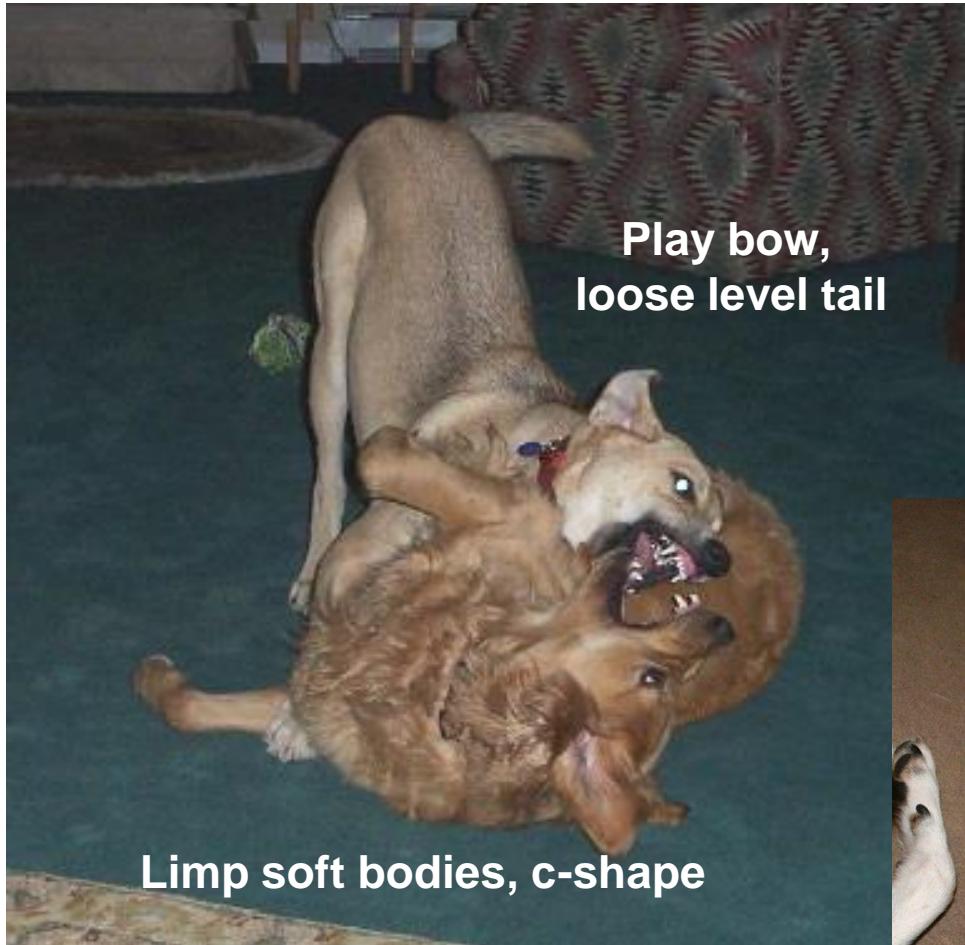


*“Throw  
the ball!”*



Object play is based on predatory sequence:  
*stalk, chase, capture, kill, dissect, consume.*

## Playing by the rules requires:



How can you tell this is playing  
and not fighting?

Good bite inhibition.

Paying attention and  
responding to how a  
playmate is feeling ...  
and a certain amount  
of self-restraint.



## Dropping into a sudden down or sit in the middle of a rousing play session is a cut-off signal

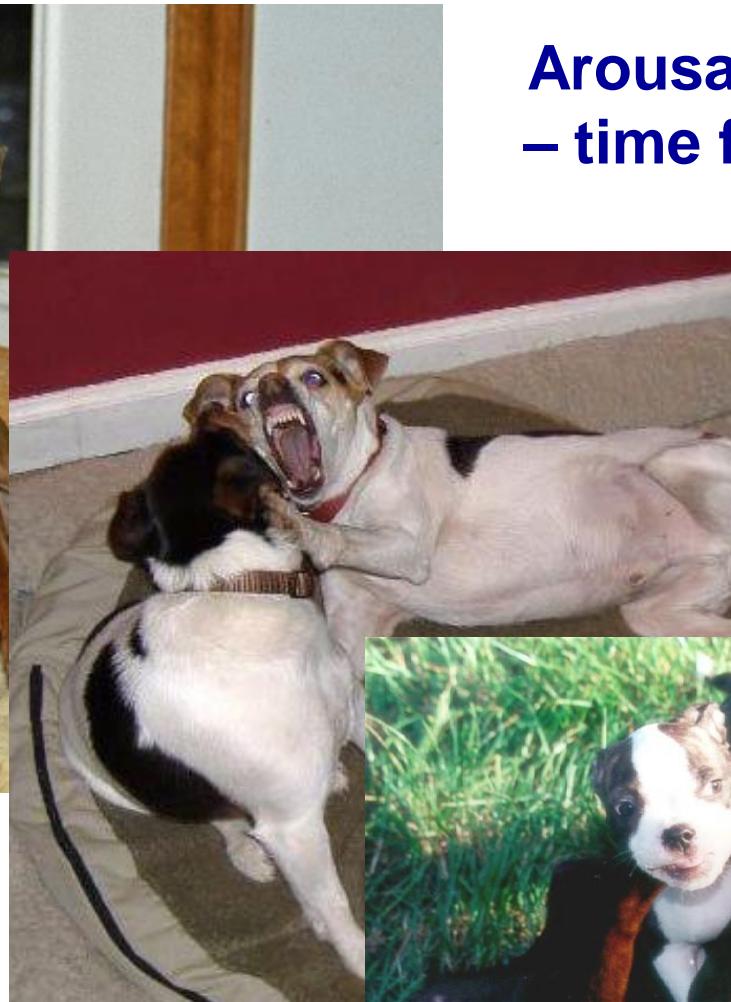


They were running full speed when she spun and dropped, effectively ending the chase. Notice the Shepherd's hackles up over his shoulders, high tail, direct stare and tight lips. Belgian's lips are drawn back, ears back – he's too much for her and she told him so.



## ESCALATION

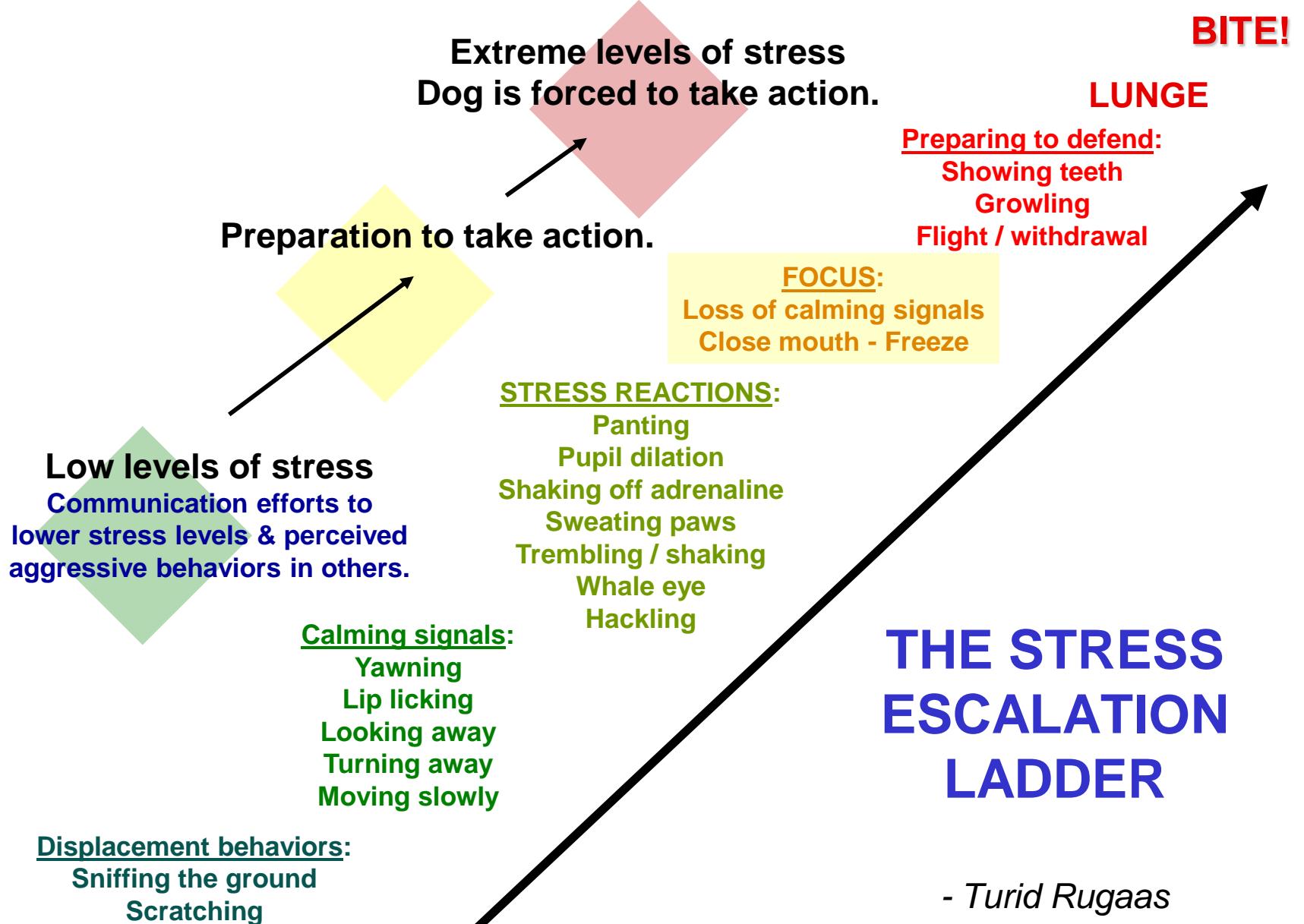
- Wide open eyes, pupil dilation
- Sideways look - "whale eye"
- Teeth bared, commissure forward



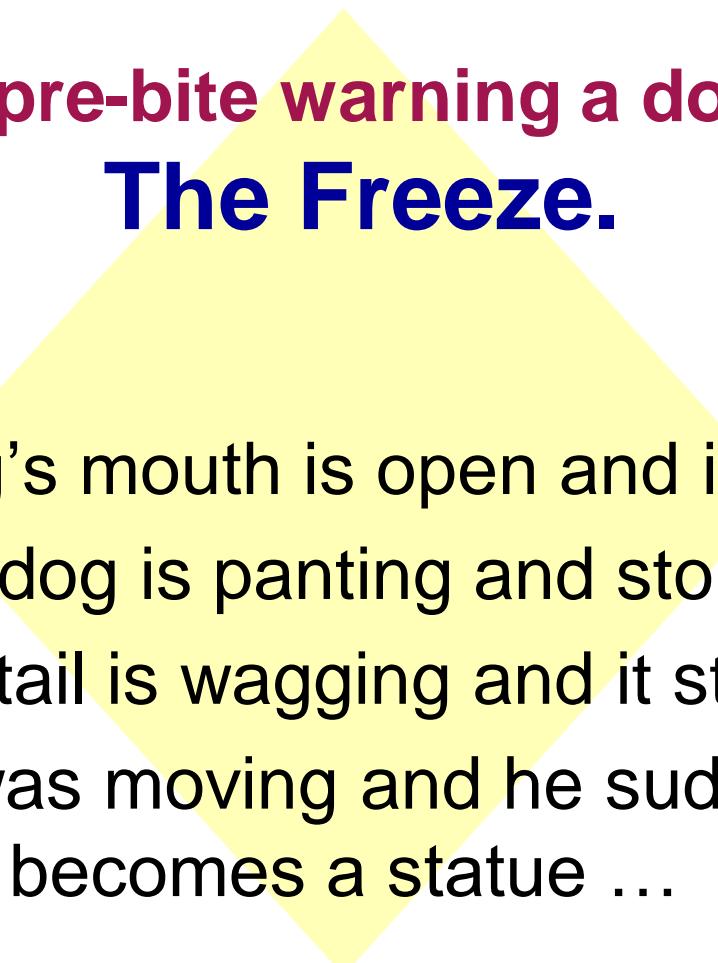
Arousal levels rising  
– time for a time-out?

Sometimes  
play can get  
carried away.





## **The biggest pre-bite warning a dog will issue: The Freeze.**



If the dog's mouth is open and it closes.  
If a dog is panting and stops.  
If his tail is wagging and it stops.  
If he was moving and he suddenly  
becomes a statue ...

### **PAY ATTENTION!**



**When in a state of arousal a dog goes still, even for a split second, consider it a warning.**

**Be aware of where he is looking.  
That is where he will bite you if he decides to bite.**

## The freeze.

A freeze can happen in the blink of an eye.  
Or the dog may go eerily still and make the hair rise on the back of your neck.

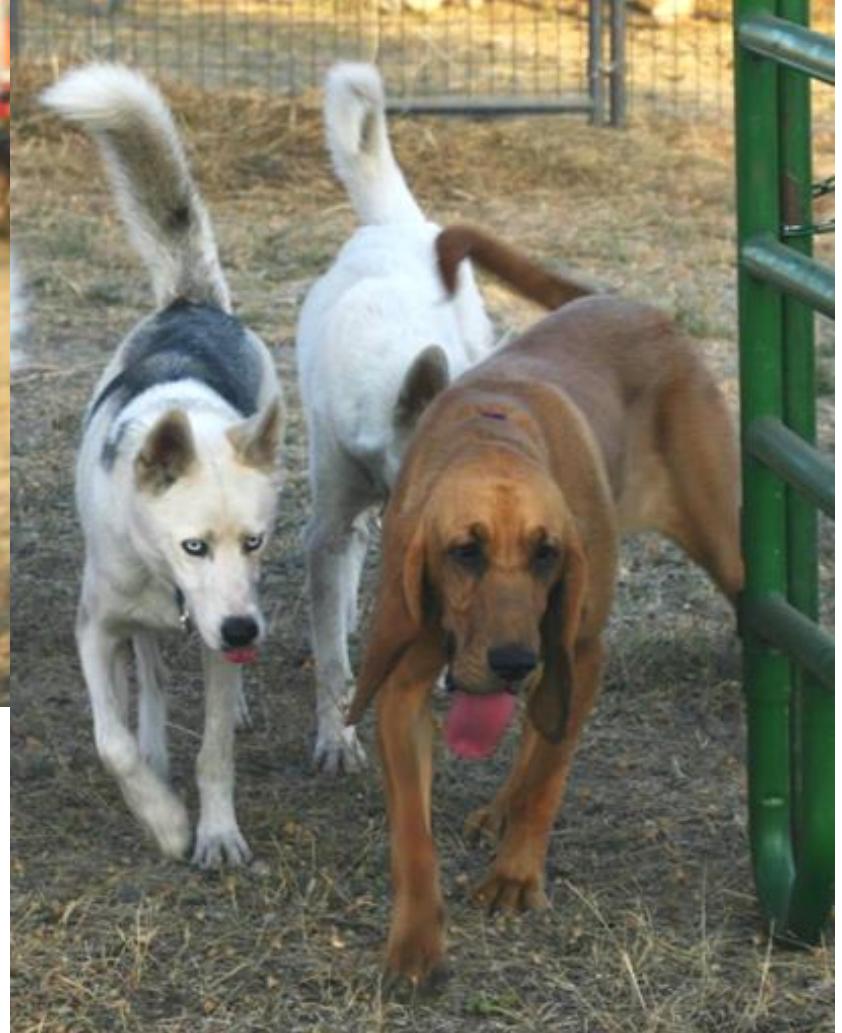


# Space invasion



A challenge – too close for comfort.

## Controlling space - Controlling movement



### Shadowing Social harassment

There is a different intensity and intent from the tag-along mirroring of one dog simply following another.

# Keeping peace in the pack - SPLITTING



Stepping in to calm >  
down too-rough play.

Stepping in. Running interference when  
an interaction becomes too intense.

< Considering splitting up.



The other dogs respond by lowering their bodies, lip licking, looking away.

## Splitting up is often misunderstood.

Often mistaken for "jealousy" or "protecting" - splitting up is a peace-keeping action, designed to slow things down and create space when things get too close or might topple over into a fight.

- A dog might step between hugging humans just to be included in a friendly moment, or to split up an action that feels too intense or might be dangerous.
- A similar action sometimes mistaken for jealousy or protection is actually resource guarding. A dog might step in between hugging humans to display ownership.
- There can be over zealous splitting. Many herding breeds are hall monitors who feel it necessary to stop *all* interaction, conflicted or not.

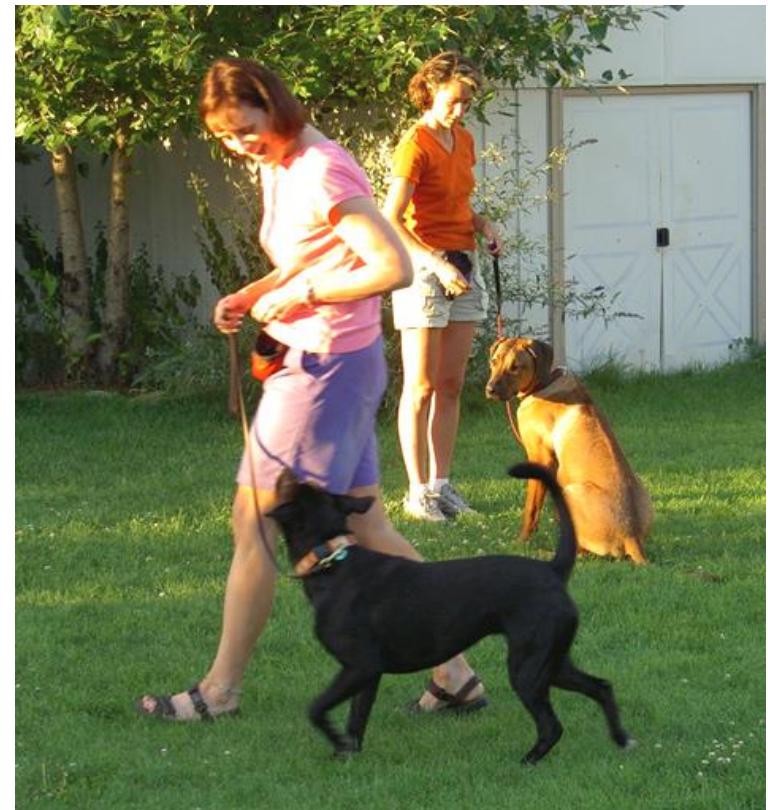
**Look at the context and intent.**

## **Another type of splitting is Body Blocking.**



**By controlling the space, speed and direction of travel between dogs, you can control the situation.**

**Handlers can use splitting to avoid confrontation by moving in a curve and putting their body between their dog and a distraction or possible confrontation.**





^ This handler uses body blocking to give his pup a bit of relief from the invasive pup's advances.

## Dogs use body blocking –

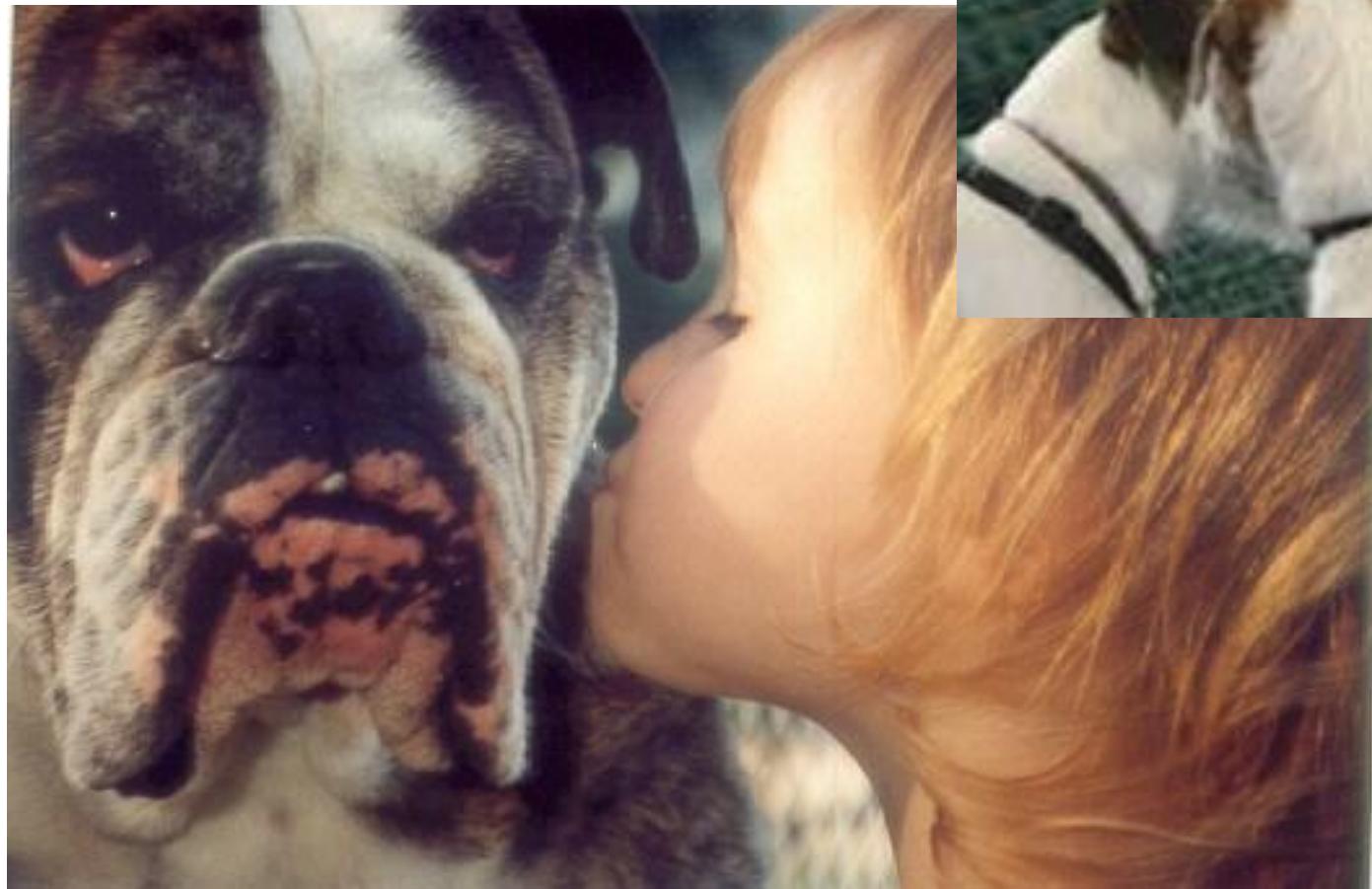
It could be a person or a thing that creates separation and safety.



**Many overly-friendly, over-stimulated dogs  
rush in too fast and too close, ignore subtle  
warnings to mind their manners, and get decked for it.**



**Children do the same thing,  
with the same results.**



**This is why most bites to children are to the face.**

A dog will correct a puppy with an open mouth muzzle pin,  
inflicting little or no pressure, just lots of noise and spit  
– an attempt to educate a space invasive youngster, not harm her.

## **Human space invasion: HUGGING.**

**Dogs don't appreciate hugs from strangers any more than you do.**

**Dogs must learn to be comfortable accepting physical restraint.**

**To us a hug is affection. To them, a threatening gesture.**



**This dog adores this boy.  
But at this moment,  
is he really enjoying this hug,  
or merely tolerating it?**



True “dominance” in the canine world has to do with courtship & breeding rights not pack leadership.



## Dominance move: Chin on shoulder

- An assertive challenge.
- A signal of intention to mount.



Does a hug feel the same?



Uncomfortable  
closeness.



**Over-loving and unrealistic expectations are often the biggest stress on the child-dog relationship**



**A little bit goes a long way.**

## Looming, leaning & staring



A loom is a threat  
in dog language

It triggers an innate self  
preservation response.



It feels predatory and  
dangerous >

Imagine the dog is your human child  
and this man is a stranger  
in a park.

Why do we expect our dogs to  
welcome the invasive approach  
of strangers?

Pup looks off in the distance, pretending the man isn't there. A cut-off signal.

A stand-over stare elicits appeasing behavior.



**This is not “guilt”!**

The boxer responds with squinty eyes, ears back, tail tucked, open hind leg, and lowered shoulders. Appeasement signals placate the assertive approach of the other dog.





**Her voice may say, “Come!”**

**But her body language says,  
“Stay where you are, I’m  
dangerous.”**

- Leaning forward, staring, reaching
- Predatory stance contradicts the invitation to come closer.
- If the dog comes, she will probably come slowly on a curve.
- Dogs who circle just out of reach are not saying, “neener, neener, can’t catch me!” They are conflicted – they want to come, but your body language creates a buffer, repelling them away.

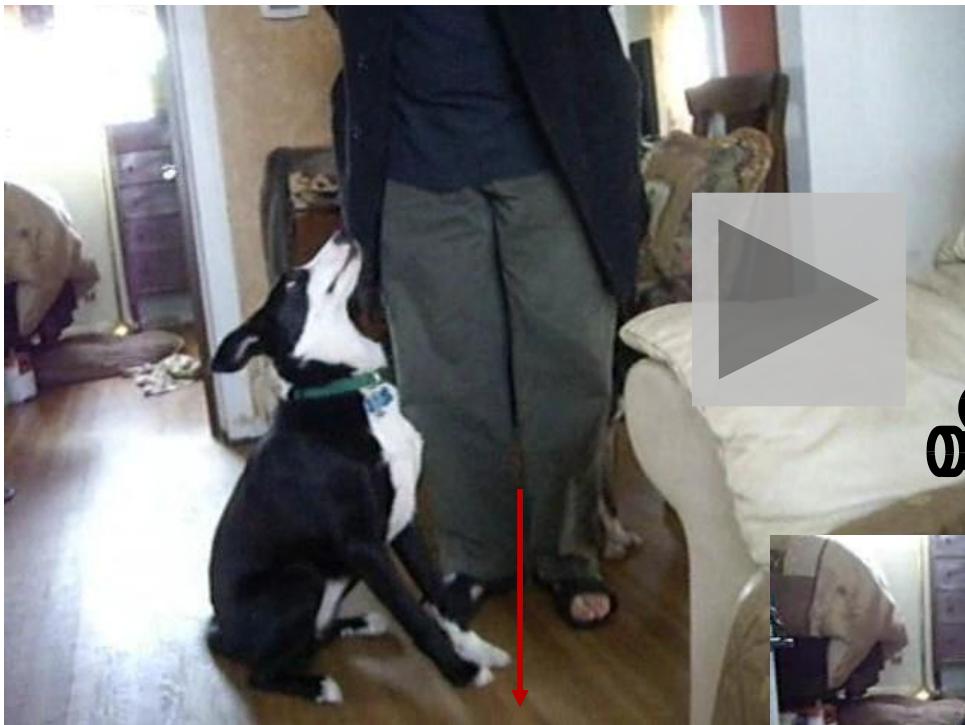


## Human greeting: looming and reaching

This is how most people greet dogs.

If dogs could change one thing about us, this would probably be it.

**Leaning over and looming is a threatening gesture, even if you don't mean it to be.**



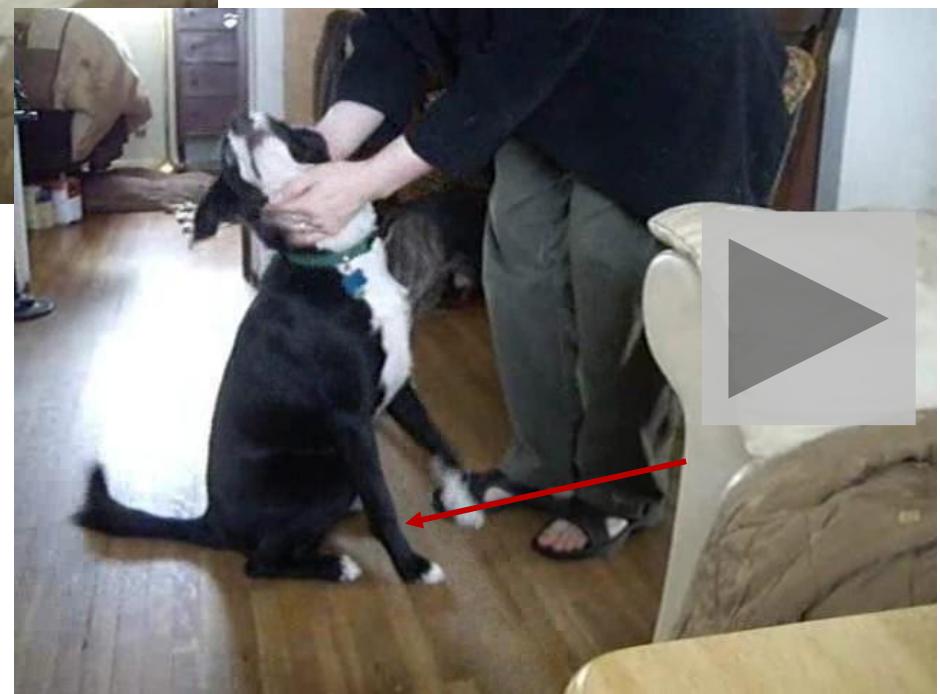
^ oblique angle  
vs.  
facing & hovering >

Note: increased  
calming signals, weight shift,  
raising & lowering of head,  
avoidance & shake off

## Sit for petting

Dog positions herself at side and leans in.

In second clip  
person has stepped  
to face front.



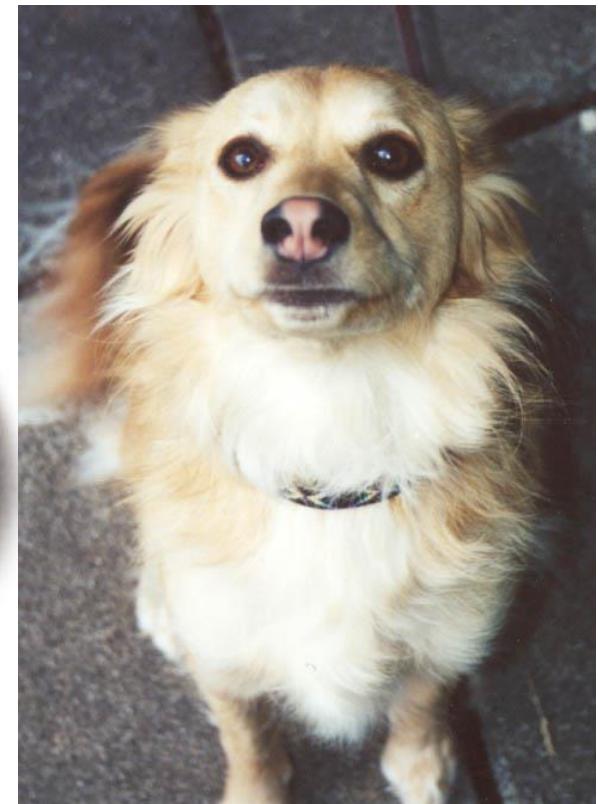
# Comfortable? Uncomfortable?



Relaxed, open mouth.



Squinty appeasing.



Closed mouth, tense.

Weight is forward in dogs one and two. Weight is shifted back in dog three.

What could you do to make this greeting more comfortable for these dogs?



**How does this dog feel?**

**This dog is not  
comfortable.**

- eyes large and round
- lips are tight and pulled back
- ears are back and low on her skull

Just because she didn't growl or run away, doesn't mean she welcomed your looming, reaching, in-your-face greeting. It only means she tolerated it.

**The next time you hover over a dog to pet it over the head and shoulders, pay attention to what the dog says in return.**

## **Weight shift back – Wary, cautious, fearful.**

**What body language signals do you see?  
What can you do to make this dog feel better?**



**Never reach for  
a cornered dog!**

**Squat, turn sideways.  
Let him come to you when ready.  
Always leave room for escape.**

- Rear quarters crouched
- Eyes hard, whites showing
- Ears forward, but dropped to sides
- Mouth closed, lips tight.



## Paw on shoulder – loom. A threat in dog language.



Humans assume this same posture when greeting an unfamiliar dog, when attaching a leash, or when hugging and kissing our dogs on the head. Force-trainers do it when pushing an untrained dog into a down.

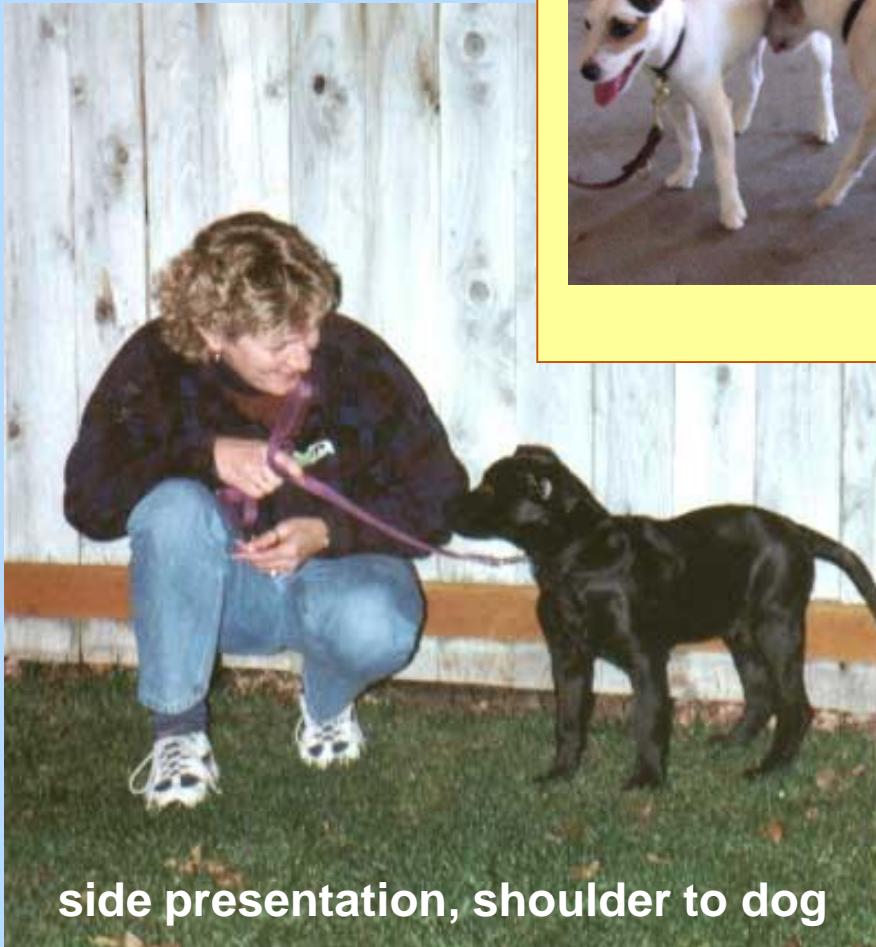
## **Shoulders square, facing, reaching elicits appeasement**

**Groveling on approach doesn't automatically mean "abused" – more often, it's just a sensitive or under-socialized dog, not a mistreated one.**

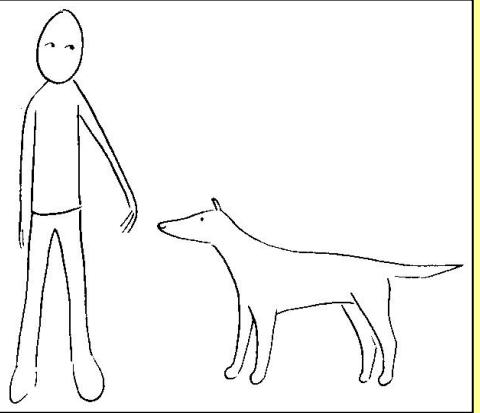


**Excitement or submissive urination are triggered by this greeting posture.**

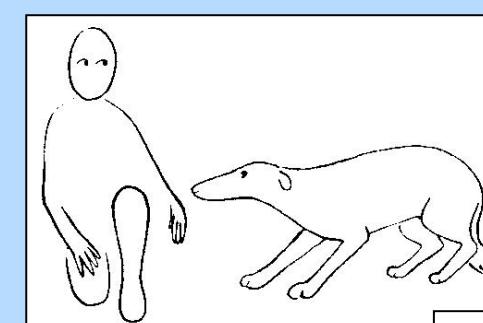
## Proper greeting



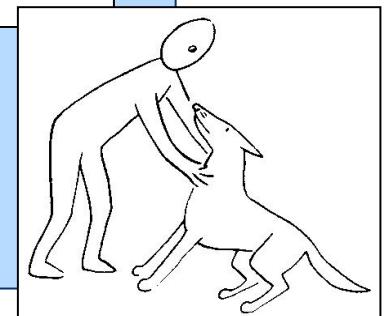
side presentation, shoulder to dog



Confident dog



Shy dog



Bad human!

**Relaxed, friendly eye contact.**

Human's body weight shifted away, inviting puppy in.

The tiniest shift in weight or physical orientation can make a huge difference.

# Proper human-dog greeting posture



**Side by side, cheek to cheek, soft squinty eyes.**



**Head tipped,  
body leaning  
to the side,  
soft, squinty eyes.**

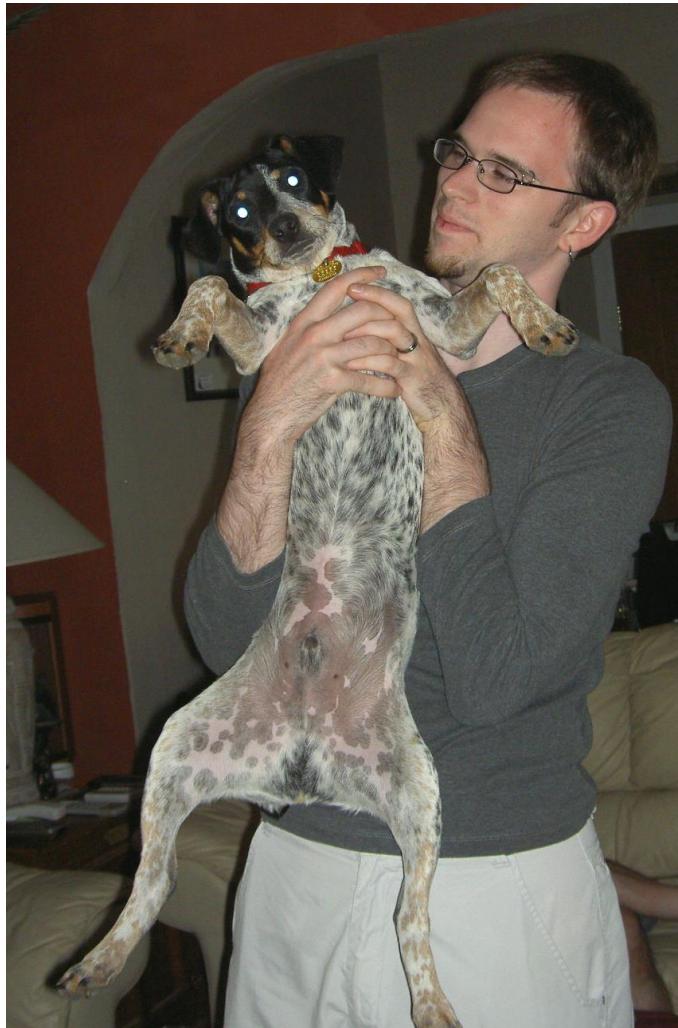
**Dog responds with  
trusting eye contact,  
gentle facial expression.**



*Note the  
change in  
expression  
when she  
squares her  
shoulders  
and leans  
forward.*



## **Teach your dog to expect and accept the invasive actions of silly human beings.**



**Socialize, socialize, socialize.**

Make sure your new puppy meets and has rich and novel positive experiences.

Groom touch and handle every day.

Gently introduce looming, kissing, hugging and snuggling so it becomes an enjoyable part of your relationship.

**Your dog won't be as alarmed about the odd things strangers do if they are "normal" to everyday life.**

**His threshold and tolerance will go up and so will his safety with visitors.**

# Dogs struggle to understand humans as much as most humans struggle to understand dogs.

- We stand on two legs, loom, stare and show our teeth to be friendly like the primates that we are. We cut off polite and proper canine introductions – “first name / last name” - nose to tail!
- We use aggressive and intimidating postures as friendly gestures: straight on / too fast approach, reaching over to put “paws” on shoulders, “mounting” (hugging).
- Well-socialized dogs with a rich experience base have a better chance of learning what we bumbling humans really mean.
- Humans with a little “canine body language education” will find it easier to communicate safely and make friends with cautious or defensive dogs and find it easier to train their own dogs.
- Children who are taught to understand dog body language and to respect a dog’s personal space will be less likely to be bitten.

**We ‘speak dog’ so poorly most of the time.  
How lucky for us, they forgive our  
clumsy attempts to communicate!**



# Summary

- Body language is universal
  - you are talking, too!
- Context is key
  - sometimes a yawn is just a yawn.
- Both parties are talking.  
Pay attention to both sides of the conversation!





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## Diamonds in the Ruff

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