

# HOW DOGS COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR BODY LANGUAGE

The ability to read dog behavior and pick up on dogs' body language can be life-saving for people and for dogs. Recognizing signs of fear in a dog, expressed in a myriad of behaviors including red-flag signs like a tense, rigid body, deep growling and bared teeth, could precipitate swift action to avoid a problem.

"Accurately predicting a dog's behavior can help circumvent a dog aggression incident," says Purdue University animal behaviorist Candace C. Croney, PhD. "Whether you run a dog kennel or work as a handler or trainer, being responsive when you see warning signs and acting quickly promotes human safety, canine welfare and also protects the human-animal bond."

Dr. Croney, professor of animal behavior and well-being and director of the Purdue University Center for Animal Welfare Science, and her research team developed the Field Instantaneous Dog Observation (FIDO) tool<sup>1</sup> to help kennel owners, inspectors and laypeople recognize signs of stress in dogs and evaluate their state of physical health and well-being.

"Accurate assessments of dogs' behavior and welfare are especially important in kennels where dogs are housed for extended periods of time," she says. "Not only is this important for an individual dog's well-being, it has been shown that stress can affect the physical, behavioral and emotional health of breeding dogs and their puppies."



## READING CANINE BODY LANGUAGE

### GREEN BEHAVIORS (NON-FEARFUL DOGS)



Dog is friendly, social, relaxed, or neutral/undisturbed. When approached, a green dog may continue resting, eating or playing with a toy. A dog that is friendly and comfortable may excitedly wag its tail, look at you, and position its ears forward, its head up, and its mouth slightly open as though smiling. The dog may approach you to solicit interaction by jumping up while its body language remains soft and



loose, or performs a play bow, lowering its front end and sticking its bottom in the air, encouraging a chasing game. Some dogs may sleep lying on their backs with their feet in the air, indicating they feel safe. Dogs showing green behaviors are more likely to be biddable and amenable to training than those showing red or yellow behaviors, as fear and stress often impede many types of learning.



### YELLOW BEHAVIORS (AMBIVALENT DOGS)

Dog is shy, wary or unsure. When approached, a yellow dog may show enough green and red behaviors to make it impossible to accurately place them in either of those categories, as a dog may both approach and retreat or approach but maintain enough distance to avoid contact with a person. A cautious dog also may show mixed signals via a low-wagging tail and attempt to approach with lowered body positioning, or the dog may temporarily tolerate being approached while also showing



signs of fear or stress by retreating or hiding behind other dogs to block contact with people. The tail may be tucked behind the hind legs, head down, eyes diverted, and ears lowered and back. Stress signals, often referred to as calming signals, include yawning, lip and nose licking, and head and eye aversion — behaviors that make a dog seem disinterested. They may shed and pant excessively when it is not hot and food is not present. A dog showing yellow behaviors is conflicted about the interaction and should be allowed to initiate approach and interact at its own pace rather than be forced to tolerate approach and handling. Because fear is present, the dog showing yellow behaviors should always be interacted with cautiously.



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### RED BEHAVIORS (FEARFUL DOGS)

Dog is fearful of people, other dogs, odors, noises, items in the environment, or the situation. When approached, a red dog may flee, freeze in place, exhibit behaviors such as wall bouncing or circling, or indicate fear through aggressive behavior. Aggressive behaviors include growling, barking, snapping, or lunging forward at a person. A dog's eyes may protrude or bulge with fear, ears may be alert or perked, tail up and stiff or wagging, nose wrinkled, lips pursed,



teeth showing, and hackles raised on the shoulders and spine. Offensively aggressive dogs often show forward body positioning and hard, rigid body language, including intent staring. If two dogs stare intently at each other in this manner, it rarely ends well. Defensively aggressive dogs may exhibit some of the same signals but often show calming or stress signals as well, and their body position is typically lowered and their weight shifted backward. A dog showing red behaviors is not coping well with the current situation and could bite a person or another dog.



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Source: Candace C. Croney, PhD, professor of animal behavior and well-being and director of the Purdue University Center for Animal Welfare Science, and Traci Shreyer, MA, animal behaviorist and research and education coordinator for the Croney lab at Purdue University



## TIPS OF THE TRADE

It's critically important to recognize signs of a dog's behavior and understand dog language. Here's why:

- 1 Accurately interpreting a dog's posture and body language can help you interact safely with the dog and recognize when it is safe to approach and handle a dog
- 2 Recognizing when a dog does not feel safe and secure in its environment allows you to make adjustments that increase human and dog safety and well-being
- 3 Knowing dog body language allows you to set them up for success in social interactions and avoid placing them in situations where they may not cope well and thus behave in undesirable or injurious ways to themselves or others
- 4 Behavior problems such as aggression are the No. 1 reason dogs are surrendered, abandoned and euthanized, thus understanding dog body language can help keep dogs and people safe, protect the human-animal bond and promote canine welfare



The FIDO scoring system, which is based on research sponsored by the World Pet Association and the Pet Food Institute, categorizes dog behavior much like the color coding of traffic signs:

- Red behaviors indicate fear and distress that can be problematic for a dog's welfare and for human safety, and some red behaviors signify a potentially reactive dog that may be a danger to human handlers and kennel workers. All red behaviors indicate a dog is uncomfortable with the interaction.
- Yellow behaviors reflect ambivalence, or a dog having mixed reactions to a situation, meaning humans should slow down and be cautious.
- Green behaviors describe a dog that is undisturbed from its current activities, or a dog that is friendly or wanting attention in the moment, putting interactions with humans at that point in go mode.

"Regardless whether a dog's initial response is red, yellow or green, handlers should check the dog's posture and signals throughout their interactions to ensure safety and well-being of both the dog and the handler," Dr. Croney says. "Some of the biggest concerns with dog safety relate to fearfulness dogs may experience when confronted by strangers or novelty."

In kennels, this can happen when new people come to breed dogs, drop off unfamiliar dogs, and assist with kennel chores that include handling dogs, especially in ways in which they are uncomfortable or unaccustomed. Dogs also meet unfamiliar people at field trials, dog shows, obedience, and agility events, virtually any dog sport. Dogs can pose risks to veterinarians, groomers and others whom their caretakers may be familiar

with if dogs are fearful, in pain or distressed about being handled and restrained for procedures viewed as routine by humans, but not by the dog.

"FIDO evaluates a dog's physical health and his behavioral response to being approached," explains Dr. Croney. "Body postures are used to categorize the dog's response as fearful, not fearful or ambivalent. This provides a guide for monitoring dogs at all stages when people are interacting with them, which is useful as dog behaviors can vary throughout such interactions. For example, a dog's initial perception of an interaction as positive can change, resulting in a behavioral situation that requires the person to adapt quickly and appropriately."

The research team conducted a pilot test to see if FIDO was an objective tool that enabled consistent ratings of dog behavior among novice observers and expert behaviorists. The inter-rater reliability of the FIDO tool showed that with proper training, novices could score dog behavior consistently with experts. The study also showed the tool's potential usefulness in assessing individual dogs and identifying those having difficulty coping with their kennel environments.

"It is so important to pick up on what dogs communicate through their body language," Dr. Croney says. "Identifying dogs in need of intervention is critical from a safety standpoint and also from an animal welfare viewpoint. All dogs deserve physical, emotional and behavioral well-being."

<sup>1</sup>Bauer AE, Jordan M, Colon M, Shreyer T, Croney CC. Evaluating FIDO: Developing and Pilot Testing the Field Instantaneous Dog Observation Tool. *Pet Behaviour Science*. 2017;4:1-15.