

Understanding Dog Behavior

by Mirza Jibra'il `Attar, OL

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Meeting a New Dog for the First Time

When interacting with a dog for the first time, follow the following steps:

1. *(for minors)* Ask your parent or guardian if you can interact with the dog.
2. Ask the dog's owner if you can interact with the dog.
3. Kneel to the side of the dog and extend your hand, allowing the dog to sniff you out first. *(Do not shove your hand in the dog's face; let the dog come to you!)*

If any of these three individuals say “no” or present with any fearful or offensive behaviors *(see the following slide for examples)*, back away and do not interact with the dog. If the dog's owner says “no”, they mean it; the dog may be working *(service animal)*, may have a history of not doing well with children or men, or may be reactive to things like hats, beards, or similar things like that.

If all three say “yes” to the interaction, you may proceed with petting the dog **on their chest or front shoulders**. It is key that you do not immediately start with touching the dog's head, back, or hind-quarters. They cannot see where your hand is at, or they may have past experiences that you are not aware of that may cause them to react negatively.

Things Not to Do

Not all aggressive or offensive behavior starts with the dog. Many times, it's the body language we as humans portray that sets the tone of the interaction. Here are a few things **not** to do:

- Do not lean over a dog. This puts you as a tall thing leaning over the dog, and is very over-bearing and a sign of dominance on your part. This can elicit a fearful or offensive reaction in many dogs.
- Do not touch a dog anywhere but on their chest and front shoulders. They cannot see your hands anywhere else, and this can make them react defensively to protect themselves.
- Do not kneel directly in front of a dog. If they do react to the interaction, this puts your face in their line of attack. Your best bet is to kneel to the side of the dog so that you can easily remove yourself from the situation if necessary.
- Do not pick up small dogs without express permission. Small dogs (*such as dachshunds, chihuahuas, etc*) are the dogs most often to bite a human, because they are not being treated or handled like they are a dog/animal. Also, picking an animal up like this puts them closer to your face, which is not where you want a dog to be if they decide to react negatively to the situation.

	Comfortable Dog	Fearful Dog	Dog on the Offensive
			
		<i>(flight or freeze)</i> wants to get away	<i>(fight)</i> wants you to go away
Tail	loose, wagging	held low or tucked	held high, stiff, may be wagging
Eyes	avoids eye contact	stares fearfully, may try to turn head or avert gaze <i>(whites of the eye showing)</i>	holding eye contact
Ears	held back softly	held back tightly	perked forwards
Body Movement	relaxed, loose muscles, may be arching	tense, not much movement	oriented towards you – front on, stiff movement
Back	weight on all fours, may lower body	weight back, arched, or lowered	weight forward
Vocalization	pant, bark	quiet	growl, snarl

Calming Signals

When a dog is feeling threatened, overwhelmed, or are on their way to being over-stimulated, they can present any number of physical behaviors to warn you that they are uncomfortable:

- Yawning
- Lip-licking
- Sitting or laying down
- Sniffing the ground
- Standing silently, gazing off
- Drinking
- Urination or defecation
- Grooming or scratching
- Shaking off

Postures & Behavior Indicating a Stressed or Over-Stimulated Dog

Every animal has a different threshold for how much stimulation they can tolerate. Being in a new social setting, being around a lot of people or other animals, and experiencing new scents and sounds can change that threshold.

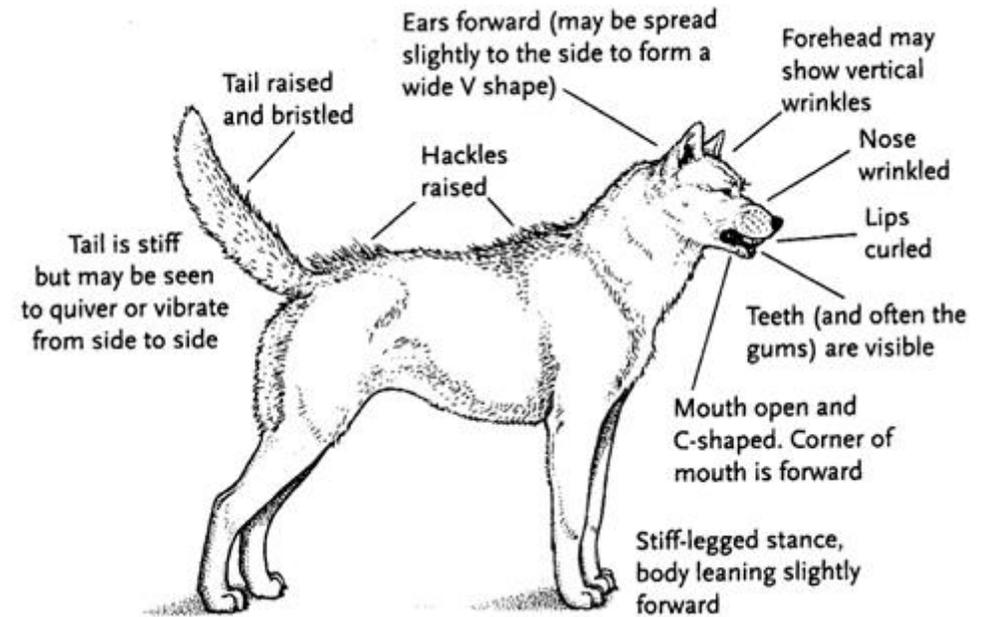
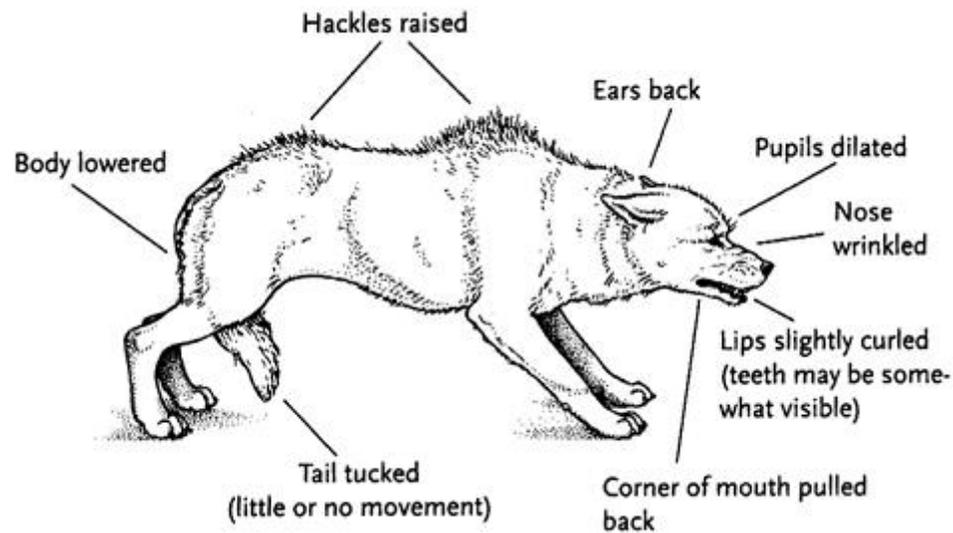
Things to look for:

- forward postures
- hackles raised
- barking
- tail high over the back that looks stiff and not loose

Signs that a dog is over their threshold of tolerance:

- growling
- lip lifting
- snarling
- snapping
- lunging

Defensive Posture vs Offensive Posture



Content on this slide was provided courtesy of the Dumb Friends League, based in Denver, CO. <http://ddfl.org>

Aggressive or Just Reactive?

As mentioned on the previous slide, every animal's threshold of tolerance to changes and external stimuli changes in new situations. A dog that is perfectly comfortable at home or in their neighborhood park may become reactive in new interactions. Review the chart of animal postures and behaviors to watch, and be aware that some of these behaviors may be situationally based.

Leash reactivity: some dogs may get excited specifically while they are on leash; often they can be found straining or lunging while on leash, sometimes barking or jumping in the process

Dog or Cat reactivity: some dogs may not do well with other dogs or cats present, often barking and lunging in the direction of the offending animal

Dogs may also be reactive to other stimuli such as bicycles, wheelchairs, too many people around them, etc. It is important to be aware of environmental factors in each interaction because of this.

Inappropriate Behaviors

What is deemed inappropriate behavior is subjective and dependent on the individuals involved in the interaction. For example, some people love dogs jumping up to say hi to them; others do not.

Because of this, there's not a definitive list of non-aggressive inappropriate behaviors. However, watch for high-arousal behaviors that could escalate quickly into aggression if continued:

- possible pilo-erection (*hackles raised*)
- bounces off of you but does not interact in other ways
- pulls at the leash in all different directions
- lower impulse control (*seems to not be able to control themselves*)
- mouthy (*defined as exploring your hands with their mouth, possibly doing "puppy bites" with their teeth*)
- barking
- not listening

While high-arousal is not aggressive behavior, it does lower the threshold towards aggression. Accidents can happen more easily with aroused dogs because they do not care if they bonk you in the nose or knock you over.

This presentation is by no means an exhaustive discussion on animal behavior, nor does it lay out any policy on how to handle interactions with animals at official SCA activities or events. Please defer to official SCA event policies and officer/ event steward communications.

Keep in mind the number one rule when dealing with animals:

When in doubt...DON'T!

Thank you to Jessica Wallace, Animal Behavior Supervisor with the Dumb Friends League, based in Denver, CO, for validating and providing additional information for this presentation. For more information about the Dumb Friends League, visit <http://ddfl.org>.