

Manette M. Kohler, DVM
Veterinary Behavior Consultant
262-332-0331
helpinghanddvm@gmail.com
www.helpinghanddvm.com



*Strengthening the Human –
Animal Connection*

Dog Bite Prevention Pet Expo 2011

Canine body language is a broad topic – too broad to cover in a 30 talk so we'll cover body language as it pertains to "Dog bite prevention."

This is an important topic (As the statistics we'll go over will show). There is even a "DOG BITE PREVENTION WEEK" - May 15-21 (3rd week in May). The purpose of Dog Bite Prevention Week is to educate the general public about how to safely interact with dogs. Children and their parents are the focus of this week because it is mainly children that are bitten.

Let's look at the statistics:

Almost 5 million Americans are bitten by dogs every year! And these are only the cases that are reported! 1000 bite victims per day go to an ER. Most bites are inflicted upon younger children (12 and under), and the wounds are often to the child's head and neck. Bite is often inflicted by the family dog or another known dog. Think about that: "A known or family dog" not a wild or vicious unknown stray. So...Why are seemingly friendly dogs sending over 1000 people to the ER every day?

This all makes it sound like dogs are vicious pets. We all know that certainly is not the case. We welcome dogs into our homes as part of our families. We're crazy about dogs and they love us too. In fact, our relationship with canines goes back over 12 million years, so... clearly they have been part of our culture for a long time. The problem involves a communication breakdown (on our part).

In order to better understand dogs and thus prevent "bite" situations it is important to understand how and why dogs communicate the way they do: Millions of years ago, it was those wolves that were best able to "read" human signals and thus live in close quarters with us and obtain food from us that later became our domesticated dogs. They were genetically hardwired even way back then to "read" us. Somehow, we have failed to learn how to read dogs, even though we have lived with them for millions of years.

It makes sense that an elaborate communication system was important to wolves. Both verbal and non-verbal communication was necessary for 1) organizing and executing a hunt; 2) communicating over long distances; and, 3) also for maintaining peace and avoiding conflict within the pack. Dogs have retained much of this communication system, and they are masters at reading both humans and each other.

They growl, whimper, bark, and howl - but most of what they say is with body language. Some of their "words" are obvious: Like a snarl with raised hackles or an elaborate "Play bow". But – Most of what they "Say" is rather subtle. If we haven't been taught K9 body language we are likely to miss a lot of what they have to say.

Let's turn our attention to another statistic: In over half of the cases of dog bites, those who are bitten or have witnessed a bite from a dog often say, "THE BITE WAS UNPROVOKED!" But, was it? Dogs always bite for a reason. And they always warn us in some way first. It is very important for both parents and kids to learn to "READ" dog body language so we pick up on the cues that the dog is uncomfortable with the situation.

They can exhibit very subtle signs when they are anxious, and thus more likely to bite. A dog that is cowering as we reach for it is clearly anxious about our advances. But what about a dog that lifts up a paw and "Looks Away"? Or one that licks its lips? They are using calming signals to say that they are uncomfortable with the situation but few people will recognize this.



One way dogs tell us they are uncomfortable with a situation is with “calming signals”

What do calming signals do?

1. For avoiding threats from people and dogs,
2. For calming down nervousness, fear, noise and unpleasant things.
3. For calming themselves when they feel stressed or uneasy.
4. They are used to make others feel safer
5. And to make others understand their peaceful intentions.
6. They also enable a dog to make friends with other dogs and people.

What do they look like?

1) Yawning 2) Lip Licking 3) Turn head away 4) Sniff the ground 5) Curving their body 6) Stretching 7) Play bow
8) Sitting down 9) Lying down. (there are about 30 signals in all – to read more about calming signals read On talking terms with dogs: Calming signals, By: Turid Rugaas.

Some are so swift we can hardly see them. With observation and practice you will always be able to tell how your dog is feeling and will understand your dog much better.

Wolves and dogs are conflict-solving animals. They try to avoid conflicts. Dogs and wolves have strong instincts for 1) conflict solving, 2) communication and 3) cooperation. This is why “calming signals” are so important. By not recognizing their signals, it is us humans that tend to create conflicts between dogs and ourselves.

Has your dog ever turned his head away when you pointed a camera at him? He is saying he is uncomfortable with this. When two dogs meet, they usually both look away for a second – then they may greet each other happily. The head turn averts a direct gaze and makes both dogs feel more comfortable. You can use these signals too. If a dog seems worried with your approach, you can “look away” to help him feel better.

Example 1: You come home and notice that the dog chewed your shoe so you furrow your brow and scold the dog. Probably – the dog lowers his head, looks away repeatedly and maybe yawns or licks his lips. He is not acting “guilty” for doing a bad deed. He is using a series of calming signals to calm an unpleasant situation.

Example 2: You are at an obedience class and your dog is having a hard time understanding what it is you want him to do. You are getting frustrated and since your dog is so good at “reading” you he knows you’re frustrated. He sniffs the ground as though he’s just found the best smell ever. He is not “ignoring” you -- He is diffusing a tense situation. When you see this – it’s time for you to give yourself and the dog a break to both calm yourselves.

Example 3: Your toddler is walking over to the dog and you notice the dog lick his lips and look away. The dog is uncomfortable with the approach. Step in a redirect the toddler to something else or risk a possible bite.

Dogs use all of their facial features as well as other body parts to convey their intentions and feelings and mood. Each body part and facial expression can be thought of as “words” in a sentence. It is important to look at all of the body language cumulatively to figure out what the dog is trying to convey.

Tail: The tail is a barometer of mood. 1) Level with the plane of the back = Relaxed/Neutral state of mind; 2) Above the plane of the back = Arousal; 3) Below the plane of the back = Fearful/Concerned.

Tail Wag: It is a misconception that a wagging tail equals a happy dog. Dogs with wagging tails can bite. A tail wagging along with the whole body is a happy/friendly dog. This dog may be safer to interact with. A slow deliberate wag with tail level or high may be aroused or aggressive. A tucked wagging (possibly only the tip of the tail) indicates a fearful or submissive dog. Look at the tail along with the rest of the body to “read” the dog.

Mouth: A mouth slightly open and panting indicates friendliness/happiness. This dog may be safer to interact with. A closed mouth can mean the dog is tense, worried, or alert. Wide mouth with fast panting and red tongue indicates a state of stress.

Teeth: Teeth showing doesn't necessarily mean aggressiveness. A fearful dog may pull back the corners of its mouth into a grimace, thus showing its teeth – Much like the face we might make when we see a spider! The corners of the mouth pushed forward into a pucker along with the front of the lips pulled up exposing teeth with wrinkled up nose indicates aggressiveness or assertiveness. Both of these dogs should be avoided!

Eyes: Body signals with the eyes can be subtle and easily missed. Relaxed or squinty eyes indicate friendliness or happy/relaxed, as well as submission. We refer to this as a "soft eye". This may be a safer dog to approach or interact with. Eyes wide open and showing the white of the eye indicates fear or arousal. This is called a half-moon eye. Pupils dilated could indicate low light but can also indicate arousal or fear. Intense stare with little blinking indicates high arousal/may bite! Called a "hard eye".

Head: A head held high indicates an alert dog but can also indicate Arousal/aggression. A head turned to the side indicates "Interest". Head held low or drooping can indicate fear/worried/unhappy/submission.

Ears: Ears up indicate arousal. Ears back and down indicate Submission/fear. A happy/friendly dog tends to have ears a little more relaxed and even back a little.

Hair: Hair raised (Piloerection) indicates arousal, aggression, anxiety, or fear. Any dog with raised hair should be avoided.

When trying to "read" a dog's intention or mood it is very important to look at all of the body parts together. We should only approach or interact with dogs that are clearly displaying calm and friendly body language. We can never REALLY know what's going on in the mind of a dog! Dogs can send mixed signals at times, too, so if we are not sure what the dog is saying with its body language, it is safest to STAY AWAY.

How can we interact safely with dogs? Parents should supervise all interactions between dogs and children – even the family dog. Bites can occur in the blink of an eye – so be present to prevent it. Encourage children not to approach any dog that does not belong to them. Never allow rough play or chasing games between a child and a dog.

Dogs don't like hugs and kisses! Teach children to never hug or kiss a dog. Primates, humans included, love to hug but dogs can find this very threatening. The family dog may tolerate and even learn to enjoy a hug or kiss from their "special humans" but may not tolerate it from anyone else. Our own dogs can also have a "bad day" and just not want to tolerate a hug. Hugs and Kisses are one reason children are often bitten in the face!

"Be A Tree": Teach your children to stand still and "Be a Tree" if a dog is bothering or frightening them or if a strange dog approaches – even if the dog looks friendly. 1) stand still 2) fold in their arms (branches), 3) look down at their roots (feet), 4) and count in their head. The dog will likely lose interest and wander away.

Here is a list of "DO's and DON'T's for interacting with dogs:

When greeting a dog, stand sideways with your shoulder to the dog. An approach face-on is intimidating and threatening to a dog. While sideways to the dog, stoop down to their level without looming over them. Looming or leaning over a dog is a space invasive challenge. They may act frightened and defensive and possibly bite out of fear or they act more assertive and lunge, growl or bite. Look at the dog's feet as you approach and greet him. A direct stare into his eyes can be seen as a challenge.

Always ask for permission before petting any dog. First ask the owner and then ask the dog by observing his body language – does he look friendly? Then allow the dog to approach you rather than you entering the dog's space. Let the dog sniff your fist, palm down before petting. Fingers are more likely to be bitten than a fist, especially by playful pups.

Pet or scratch Under the dog's chin, on the side of the neck or on the chest. Petting over the top of the head, neck, or shoulders can be viewed as threatening to the dog. Dogs will show dominance to one another by placing a paw or their chin over another dog's shoulder/neck area – this is called a "paw-over" or "chin-over".

Don't approach a tied dog. A dog could bite out of fear because he feels trapped or to protect his area. Walk calmly up to and away from dogs. Rushing up to a dog can be quite scary to the dog. Running away can often result in a dog chasing.

Only approach a dog showing "friendly" body language. Remember, even your friendly family dog can have a bad day. He may be tired, painful, or even "on-edge" because of an approaching storm. If, after interacting with the dog for a while, you notice calming signals like yawning or looking away, etc. it is time to leave the dog alone. Only approach a dog if he is awake and sees you. An unexpected touch can startle a dog resulting in a bite.

Keep your distance: 1) If the dog has a treat or toy; 2) If the dog is near his food or water dish; 3) If the dog is on or near his bed or on a piece of furniture. Many dogs feel they need to "guard" these special resources from other animals and people, including their family members. Also, children should never attempt to get one of their own toys away from a dog – they should always get an adult to help. (Note: If the dog is a serious resource guarder, teaching the dog to "drop it" on command by exchanging for something else like a tasty treat, is safer than wrestling the toy away from the dog).

Respect old, injured or ill dogs. Older dogs may have failing hearing or eyesight and can have pain or illness that may affect their judgment or disposition. Limping dogs or dogs with bandages should be left alone. (Note: tell children to stay away from dogs with gray muzzles)

Keep your face away from the dog. This can be unwanted space invasion. It may startle or annoy the dog and he may bite, and the bite will be in the face.

Don't put your hands into a car, crate, pen or room in which a dog is confined. The dog may bite out of fear or to protect his resting place.

When faced with a growling or barking dog: Children should Stand still and "Be a Tree". Any movement such as backing away could trigger an attack. Most dogs will lose interest and move away. It is a rare dog that is severely emotionally disturbed which will attack anyway. In this case, if the child is knocked down, he should lie like a log, face down, using hands to protect the back of his neck and forearms to protect his face.

Displacement behavior: These are normal behaviors that occur out of context and signal conflict in the mind of the dog. Examples: Yawning when not tired; Licking lips without food present; Shaking when not wet or dirty. The dog wants to do something but is suppressing the urge to do it. Example: While interacting with a child a dog starts to yawn. This signals conflict in the dog's mind. Perhaps he would like to snap at the child but he suppresses the urge to do so and yawns instead. It is time for the child to leave the dog alone.

Final thoughts: 1) A dog's mind can change from one moment to the next and so will his body language. 2) Never leave a child unattended with a dog – accidents can happen in the blink of an eye. 3) Practice "reading" your dog – Understanding your dog better will allow you to be a better "parent" for your dog. It will also help you in training and handling and will surely enrich your life.