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## **THE BODY LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIORS OF DOGS**

Dogs use their voices, body postures and facial expressions to communicate their intentions and emotional states. By first observing, and then interpreting both what you see and hear, you can make better predictions about what your dog is doing, is likely to do, and why.

You need to know what your dog looks like when he's around the baby and other people to determine if he is fearful, threatening or just playful. Sometimes the signals of a fearful or threatening dog are subtle and not at all obvious. There is no one feature of your dog's body that you can rely on to understand your dog's behavior. It's a myth, for example, that a dog wagging his tail won't bite.

Different features may not always communicate the same motivation. Your dog's ears may be back, indicating fear, while his tail might be held high, which indicates offensiveness or arousal. When features don't agree with one another, your dog may be confused, conflicted or unsure about how to behave.

Watch your dog's body language and behavior when she is in each of the following situations: 1) around the baby doll when you are practicing exercises, 2) when she is around visitors, 3) when she is around other children, 4) when she is around your baby. During these times, complete the Body Posture Checklist for your dog on all of the six features listed (ears, eyes and gaze, tail carriage, overall body carriage, facial expression, hair standing on end, called piloerection). Check all the characteristics that apply. Observe and record what you see before you interpret your observations. You are likely to miss an important feature if you try jumping to interpretations without careful observations. If your dog is in any of these situations for any length of time, say five minutes or more, her behavior and mood may change. Be sure to watch for such changes and record them. For example, she may be slightly fearful of children when first meeting them but then become friendly after a few minutes.

After you've completed the checklist, match your findings to the categories in the "Interpreting Your Dog's Body Language" section. The drawings in Figures 1-6 show you what these different body postures look like, and will help you to correctly identify your dog's motivations. If your dog's postures don't fit neatly into one category, it's

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because there's more than one reason behind the behavior. Just list all the possible categories that fit your observations.

If you purchased our Canine Body Postures™ videotape/DVD with this book, stop and watch the tape now. The video will be a big help to you in interpreting your dog's postures. If you don't have the tape, order it from our website.

## **YOUR DOG'S BODY POSTURE CHECKLIST**

### **Record your observations**

#### **Your dog's overall body carriage**

- Stiff legs, upright stance
- Crouched
- Head/neck low
- Head/neck carried high
- Sitting or lying down
- Directly facing what he's barking at
- Turned away or hiding from what he's barking at
- Goes toward what he's barking at
- Moves away from what he's barking at
- Play bows

#### **Your dog's ear carriage**

- Ears pricked forward or upright
- Ears pulled back against head or bent down to the side
- Cropped ears – can't tell

#### **Your dog's tail carriage**

- Tail carried high, above the body
- Tail carried low, and/or pointing downward
- Tail tucked between legs
- Tail stationery, not moving
- Tail wagging furiously and rapidly from side to side
- Tail wagging slowly and deliberately from side to side
- Docked or no tail, can't tell

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**Your dog's eyes and gaze**

- Dog staring directly at what he's barking at
- Dog looks away from what he's barking at
- Eyes squinty, partially closed
- Eyes open normally
- Eyes wide open, whites of eyes exaggerated
- Pupils (center black part of eye) dilated

**Your dog's facial expression**

- Mouth closed and relaxed
- Baring teeth by retracting lips vertically (up and down) from the front of the mouth.
- Canine teeth mostly visible
- Baring teeth by retracting lips horizontally from the corners or back of the mouth.
- Molars or side teeth visible
- Teeth not showing but muzzle tense and/or puckered
- Submissive grin

**Are your dog's hackles up? (Piloerection – meaning erect hair)**

- Yes
- No
- Partly

**Does your dog show any of the following?**

- Excessive scratching or grooming
- Frequent yawning (several times a minute)
- Frequent licking of the lips (several times a minute)
- Excessive panting
- Drowsiness or sleep

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## **KEY TO YOUR DOG'S BODY POSTURES**

### **Interpret your observations**

#### **Offensive threats (See Figure 1)**

Dogs threaten to warn others to go away or stop what they are doing. Threatening dogs may or may not escalate to biting. Dogs who are offensively threatening are not afraid. They are demonstrating their willingness to initiate a conflict or fight, and may come or lunge toward their opponent. The body postures associated with offensive threats make the dog appear larger and more intimidating. Offensively threatening dogs can show one or more of the following:

1. Stance tall with a stiff body posture
2. Body weight may be shifted to the forequarters, so the dog is ready to lunge forward
3. Hair on the back standing up
4. Tail straight up, it may be wagging slowly and deliberately
5. Ears up and forward
6. Direct eye contact or staring
7. Teeth bared from the front of the mouth (vertical retraction of lips)
8. Barking and/or growling
9. May lunge, snap at or chase others

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Figure 1. Offensively threatening dog

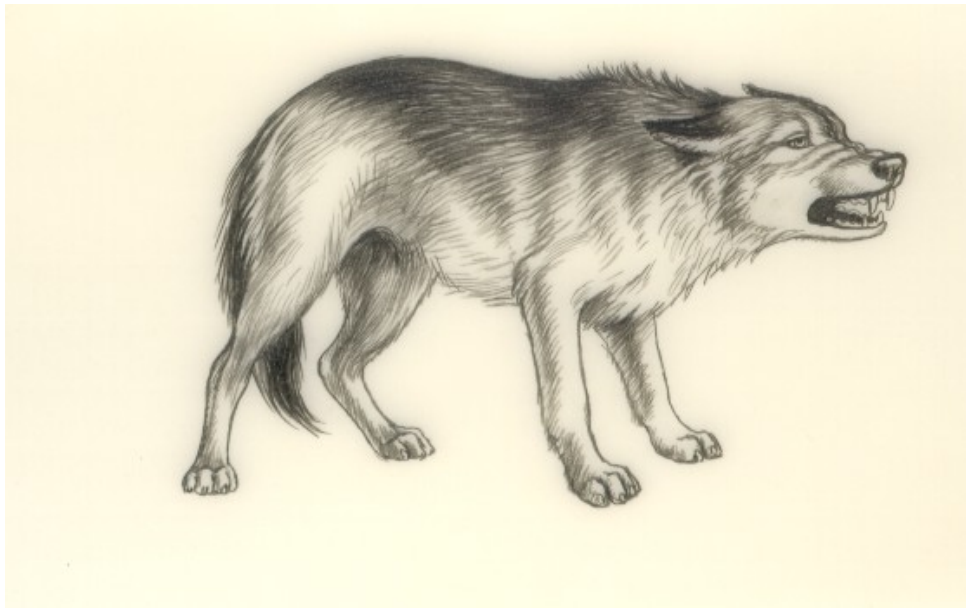


### **Defensive threats (See Figure 2)**

The defensive dog is both threatening and afraid. While such dogs are still warning others to stay away, they aren't interested in initiating a conflict. If left alone, they usually won't bite or attack. The body postures associated with defensive threats serve to make the dog appear smaller and less of a target. Defensively threatening dogs can show one or more of the following:

1. Crouched or lowered body posture
2. Dog may shift body weight more to the rear quarters, as though leaning away from the opponent
3. Ears laid back or down
4. Teeth bared from the back of the mouth (horizontal retraction of lips)
5. Barking or growling
6. Tail straight out, down, or even tucked between the legs, not wagging
7. Dog usually looks away from a direct stare
8. May move away from the opponent

Figure 2. Defensively threatening dog



**Fearful or submissive behavior (See Figures 3 and 4)**

Dogs can be fearful without being threatening. Submissive and fearful behaviors overlap with each other. Dogs show submission only during social interactions, but can show fearful behaviors toward sounds and objects as well. Fearful or submissive dogs can show one or more of the following:

1. Crouched body posture, or lying down, even rolled over on the back exposing the belly
2. Tail down or tucked between the legs
3. Ears laid back or down
4. Looks away, and avoids direct eye contact
5. May retract the lips into a submissive grin
6. May run away, or try to avoid the other person, or the fearful event or stimulus
7. May whine or whimper; fearful dogs may also bark

Figure 3. Submissive or fearful dog



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Figure 4. Submissive dog



**Alert or orienting behavior (See Figure 5)**

When something catches your dog's attention, his body posture changes from being relaxed to being focused or directed to something specific. He's not yet decided whether to be friendly, fearful or threatening – he's just paying attention. Dogs who are alerting can display one or more of the following:

1. Upright body posture, but usually not as stiff as the offensive dog – he may even be lying down
2. Body and gaze directed at the “thing” that has captured his attention
3. May bark or whine, or may be quiet



Figure 5. Alert or orienting dog



### **Friendly behavior**

Surprisingly, friendly behavior is a little difficult to describe. Friendly dogs indicate a willingness to interact and they solicit attention. They may show elements of submission and play as well. Friendly dogs can show one or more of the following:

1. Variable ear carriage – may be upright, or slightly back
2. Body posture relaxed, not stiff-legged, may be slightly crouched or lowered
3. Eyes will appear “soft,” without a hard stare
4. Variable tail carriage – may be slightly lowered or held high, usually not tucked
5. If the tail is wagging, it should be a relaxed, yet rapid wag, not slow and deliberate
6. May whine, whimper or even bark
7. May show other elements of submissive behavior
8. May lick, nudge or sniff people’s hands or arms
9. Moves toward the person or other dog

**Playful behavior (See Figure 6)**

Playful, friendly, and submissive behaviors often have elements in common. Dogs may show friendly behaviors in conjunction with or preceding playful behavior. Playful dogs can show one or more of the following:

1. A play bow
2. May paw at play partner
3. May bark, whine, whimper, or even growl, but without accompanying threatening postures
4. Variable ear carriage – may be upright, or slightly back
5. Variable tail carriage – may be slightly lowered or held high, usually not tucked
6. Other friendly behaviors

Figure 6. Playful dog



### Displacement behavior

When dogs are distressed or in conflict about something, such as being fearful of being near the baby but not wanting to leave you, they often show displacement behavior. This is normal behavior but it occurs (or is displaced) out of its normal context. These dogs are not fearful or threatening but they are distressed and in conflict. Displacement behaviors are an early sign that a dog is not relaxed and comfortable. Dogs showing displacement behavior will show one or more of the following behaviors that seem out of context:

1. Excessive scratching or grooming
2. Frequent yawning (several times a minute)
3. Frequent licking of the lips (several times a minute)
4. Excessive panting
5. Drowsiness or sleep

Figure 7. Displacement grooming, licking and yawning\*  
\*Used by permission, T. Rugaas



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Once you have interpreted your dog's body postures you can then decide if you need to take steps to change her behavior. If she is overly playful, fearful or threatening you may need the help of a professional behavior consultant to change her behavior. If your dog appears to behave differently at different times, enter all the interpretations that apply.