

Dog Bite Prevention & Canine Body Language

© San Diego Humane Society

What you don't know could put you or your dog in danger. Any dog – it could be your very own dog, your family's dog, your friend's dog, a neighborhood dog or a dog you're volunteering with at a local shelter.

As humans, we assume that dogs greet and communicate the same way that we do – in a very frontal manner. Think about it: when greeting someone, proper human behavior is a handshake, hug, eye contact and a smile. All of these behaviors, while perfectly acceptable in our minds, are often perceived as menacing and threatening to dogs. This is because frontal approaches are actually very rude and intrusive in the canine world.

We see this:



A dog sees this:



Seeing human “greeting” behaviors from a dog's perspective, it's not hard to understand why a canine might feel the need to defend herself.

Yet, when a dog bites in self-defense, people often claim that the bite “came out of nowhere.” In reality, dogs typically give many warning signs that they are uncomfortable and willing to defend themselves, if need be. You just have to know what to look for!

You can prevent a dog bite from happening.

The best way to prevent a dog bite is through education, self-awareness and interacting with dogs in a manner that is non-threatening to them.

Know the signs.

Familiarize yourself with the warning signals dogs typically offer when they're uncomfortable and prepared to defend themselves.

Dogs communicate with body language "packages." This means that at any given moment, they are using their ears, eyes, tail, body posture and mouths to communicate how they're feeling. To gauge their mood, you need to look at all these body parts simultaneously as a "package."

Examples of common dog body language packages:

- Calm & relaxed: neutral ears, mouth partially open (no teeth bared), tail low, loose body (not tense) and possibly a light pant.



- Playful: play bow, ears up and forward, tail up and/or wagging, rapid jerky movements and playful barking.



- Submissive: ears down and back, body lowered, may offer belly, tail down or tucked, whining, paw lift.



- Assertive: ears up and forward, body up on toes, tail up and stiff, may growl or bare teeth.



- Fearful: ears back, body cowered, whale eye (looking at you from side corner of eye), tail down or tucked, lip licking or yawning. May also avoid eye contact, tremble, whine, growl, try to move away or look for an escape route.



- Defensive aggression: ears back and flat, direct stare or whale eye, body leaning forward or could be retreating back, tail up and stiff, lips puckered and/or mouth open with teeth exposed.



Also note: a dog may present warning signals similar to the fearful description noted above, until she feels there is no other option and reacts defensively.

Always be self-aware.

Now that you know what to look for, **always** be aware of what a dog's body language is telling you. Remember that a dog's body language is a constant conversation and it can change in an instant. Dogs can easily become uncomfortable by something you do or something that happens in the surrounding environment. For example, perhaps a loud car goes by outside and scares the dog as you're petting them. Or perhaps you unknowingly begin petting a dog in a spot that's sore. If a dog's body language tells you they've become uncomfortable, stop what you're doing immediately and give them space.



How to properly greet and interact with a dog.

- When first meeting, kneel down parallel to the dog. Don't "square off" with a dog by facing her directly with your full body. Avoid direct eye contact and offer soft and slow blinks – this is something dogs perceive as submissive and works as a calming signal.
- If the dog allows you to approach, gently pet her underneath her chin, on her chest or her back (don't reach over her head). These are the spots where dogs are most comfortable being touched.
- *Do not go in for a hug or a kiss. Do not grab at or touch the dog's face.* Although these are gestures of endearment for humans, dogs don't know that, and perceive these behaviors as threatening.
- Never approach a dog who is sleeping, eating, chewing on a toy or bone or caring for puppies.
- Always ask the pet parent first before petting the dog.

Children interacting with dogs.

Every year, more than 800,000 people in this country receive medical attention for dog bites – at least half of these victims are children.

Children are especially vulnerable around dogs, primarily because their default greeting is to wrap their arms around a dog's neck, grab at a dog's face, pat the top of the dog's head or lean in for a kiss. For the reasons described earlier, these behaviors, although well-intentioned, are often dangerously problematic for both the child and the dog.

Well-meaning adults often instruct children to greet a new dog by holding out a hand for a dog to sniff. While this is a fine approach with some dogs, many will view this as an intrusion and/or a threat, and may react with a snap or bite. As stated above, always ask the dog's owner prior to approaching or having a child hold out a hand in greeting, and then follow the instructions above for how to interact with a new dog.

Another risk factor for small children is that they are at "face height" to larger dogs, which simply by their size can put them in harm's way when approaching a dog frontally, with direct eye contact, or too quickly. This is another reason for children to go slowly when approaching any dog, known or unknown.

Here are simple steps you can take to help ensure safe interactions between children and dogs:



- Always supervise children when they're interacting with dogs.
- Teach children how to properly greet and interact with a dog, as described above.
- Never allow children to scream at or run to/from a dog. This can cause the misperception that the child is injured or prey-like, which can trigger a dog's instinct to chase.

Keeping these tips in mind can ensure a happy relationship between you and your dog and help ensure that misunderstandings and mishaps are kept to a minimum!

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!

Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.