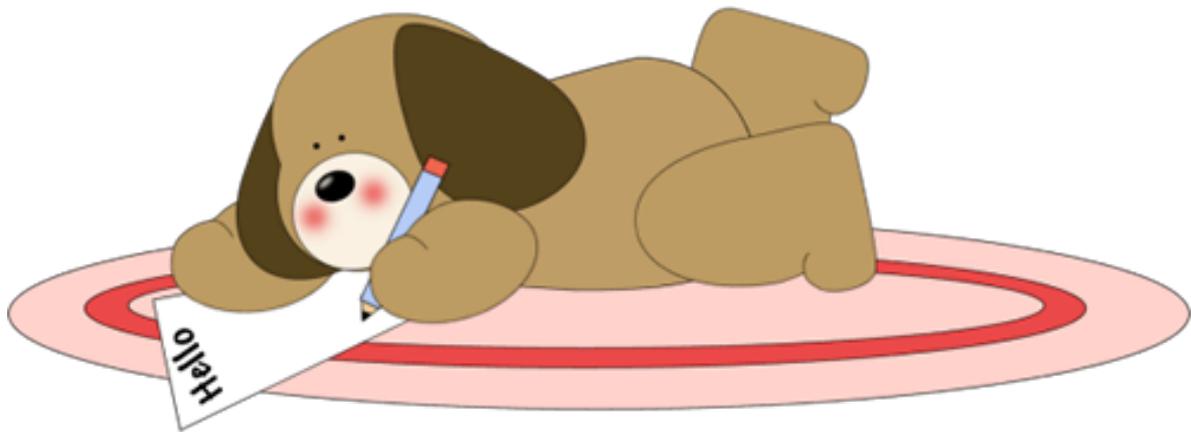


What is my dog trying to tell me?

22 May 2022 | Behaviour

LARGE PRINT/FOR DOWNLOAD with LIVE LINKS

Dogs can't talk. Or so people say.



Sure they can't speak words or write like we do, but they definitely can and do talk. And they **talk with every part of their bodies!**

Let's try and break it down.

How we at Lora's Luck look at how dogs 'talk', or at what behaviourists 'canine body language', is that you can divide it up into **three smaller sections or 'layers' to make it easier to start trying yourself**, and when you apply it to real life, when your dog talks and you listen and respond, you do it just like you do with humans in a conversation. You don't wait till tomorrow to reply, or don't bother to reply at all. You don't yell in response to a polite question or just say no without a good reason. If a human did that to you, you'd be frustrated and sad, right? So you don't want to be doing it to your dog.

The Three Layers of Canine Body

Language

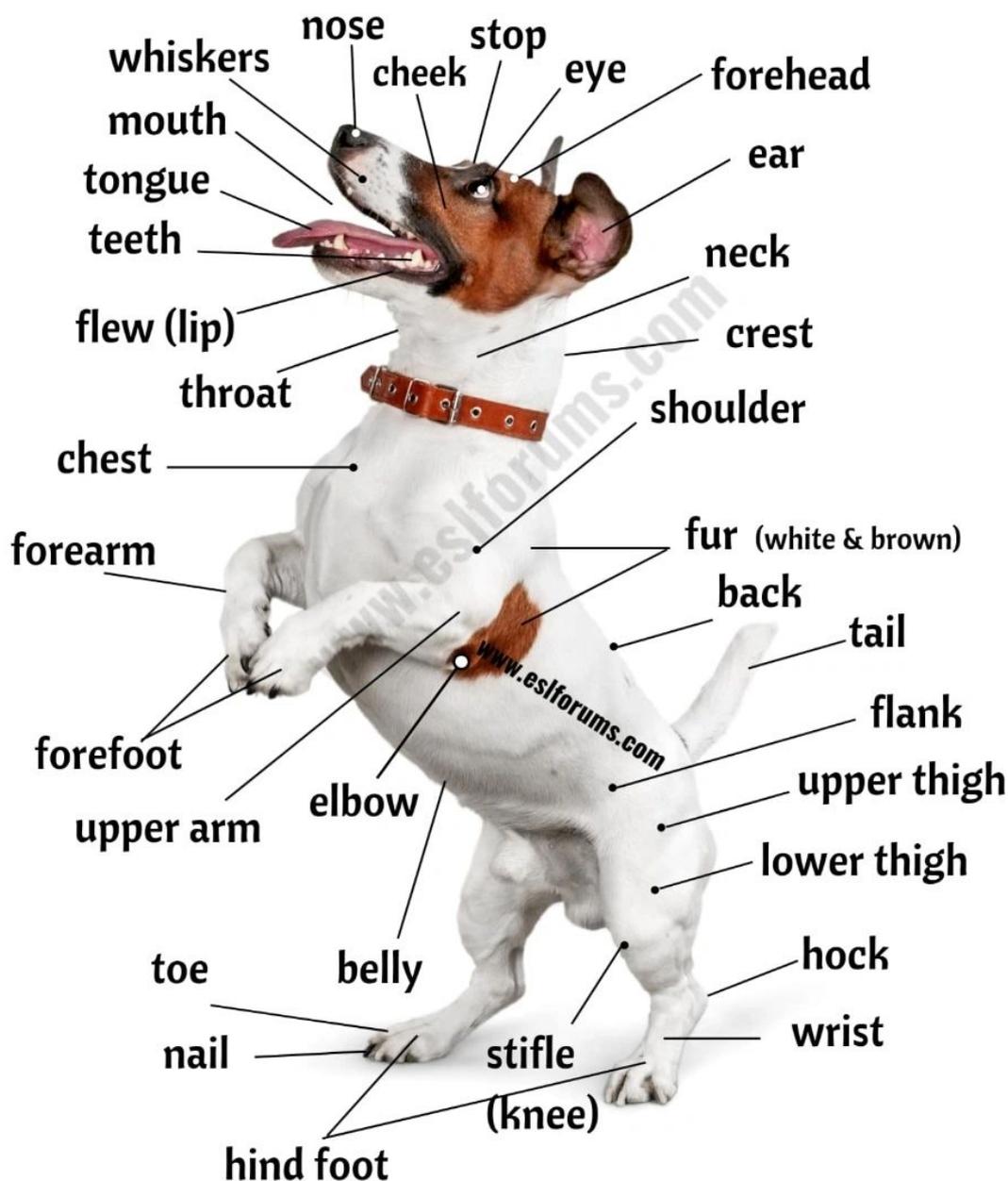
Firstly, there's

Observation-

this means you need to really start looking at your pup, and not just the cute bits. Checking their ***eyes, ears, mouth and tail*** could be a good start and slowly expand to include other body parts when you get used to looking at those. When are they up or down, back or forward? When are their eyes closed (not sleeping) or wide open and what are their pupils doing? Are they lip licking when there's no obvious food or water about or chewing at themselves?



PARTS OF A DOG



www.eslforums.com

Here's a handy quick guide to every part of your dog!

Secondly, there's

Emotion reading-

this means ***matching their body positions to the mood*** or emotions they seem to be showing. If helps, get a notebook for

them or store them in a doc so you can refer back to them and see if they change depending on what environment your dog is in. Like if you see your dog's ears always droop down when they're tired, much more than usual, make a note of that and next time you see it cut that walk or visit short(er.)

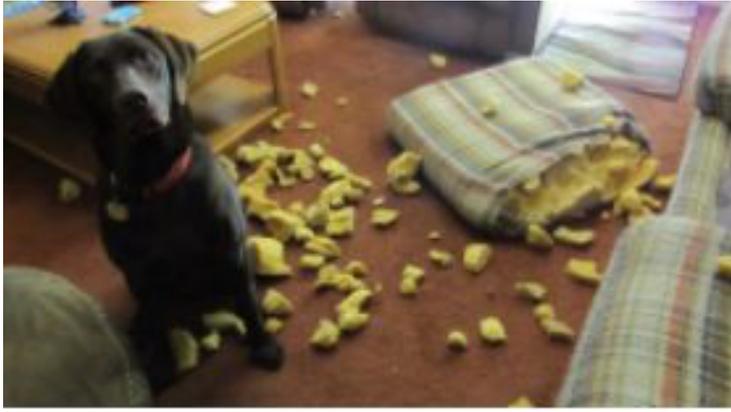
This neatly leads on to the third, and for us humans possibly *the most important part*:

Assessment-

this means the ***human response to the dog's body language and behaviour***. We need to start being honest with ourselves about

- how well we talk (back) to our dogs when they engage with us
- our expectations of dogs and how realistic they really are
- and how dependent a dog is on us for their continued existence

Are we telling them off because they are really being 'naughty' or are they just 'being a dog' at a mild inconvenience to us at the time? Are we indeed yelling at them, for asking what to them is a polite question? Are we ignoring signals because we're 'busy'? (Of course, our dogs need to know when it's appropriate to come and ask us things, just like kids, but how much are we really listening to them and are we really too busy for them as often as we think we are?)



Why has your dog just done this? Boredom? Frustration? Teenage angst? Only learning your dog will help to find out! But it can be summed up in one word- STRESS. And left unresolved, can cause obsessive and compulsive behaviours that will damage your dog's mental health in the long term.

This new look at dog actions and our reactions is vital to learn for any animal carer, as our 'version' of how a dog has or has not 'behaved' is often what saves the dog from or **dooms that dog to be put to sleep for 'aggression'!**

Dogs don't destroy your stuff out of anger or spite: that's human psychology, just the same as calling a dog 'aggressive'. And when you push 'human' emotions and motivations on your dog, you are not going to have a healthy and happy relationship with your dog.

So at Lora's Luck we do not use the word 'aggression'.

We know when a dog is **reactive**, (and this is a much better word than 'aggressive') they have *reached the end of their tether being exposed to the situation they are in* and as humans

we need to step up. **We learn their version of 'talking', their 'signals' they show us with their bodies**, in order to address emotional, mental and psychological needs in a healthy, dog focused (we call it 'canine-centric') way. We as the human carers must understand

- *one size does not fit all* dogs- what worked with previous pets even of the same breed or breed mix might not work this time
- that *understanding how dogs 'talk' is always moving on* and what might have been seen as true or ok for dogs has been proven to be **not ok now**, or even damaging to the dog when used by the human without appropriate advice/training (from simple accessories like **extender leads**; lethal in the wrong human hands, to **clickers**, (we *advise against* relying on food/reward training) **crating** (which we *do not allow* in the home or garden, and only while travelling if the dog is used to or prefers to travel in one of correct size) or **aversion 'therapy'** (never an acceptable way to train a dog, and avoid any 'behaviourist' that uses it), and this will keep happening, so *keeping up with new ideas* (and we as a rescue write these blogs to help our adopters old and new with this) is vital for you and your pup. You are the one holding the lead or clicker, the one trying to persuade the dog to feel safe in the space they are in. It needs to be done with **positive reinforcement, not with fear or food** with no back up from you.

And finally, decide that **today is the day** you will **start learning your dog**, and you'll keep doing it **for the lifetime** of your pup. **Prevention is better than cure.**

But where do I start?

Good question! We said earlier in the blog to just start on small parts of the dog's body so you can get used to doing it and don't feel overwhelmed trying to learn this new way of doing things. Nobody is born knowing how to read dogs, so like anything else we need to learn things too!

The most important thing to do is find what we call the **'default' or Neutral Relaxation**. This is the body language your dogs shows when they are *content, relaxed and calm*. One place you could start is very small, and look at your dog's eyes. You might detect what looks like a 'frown' to you, or what on a human look like 'bags' under the eyes when they're not tired. These could be your dog's 'normal' face or the start of stress, and only checking the eyes over time will help you to work out what it is in your dog's case.



After a while you will see your dog move between 'default' or Neutral Relaxation and higher then back down to lower levels of stress.

Starting to make something like a 'doggy file' on your dog *helps you to stay less stressed too!* Us humans have to know why things are happening to make sense of them. And *if we're more relaxed and confident, they will be too!* So if and when your dog appears to be exhibiting 'problematic' behaviour (no dog is perfect!) our emotions about what they are doing will be more much negative if we can't work out their reasoning. And we

must *never forget* that often their '**bad**' behaviour was created **and continued by us accidentally** due to lack of knowledge **or on purpose** due an unwillingness to bin outdated ideas on dogs, **and unrealistic societal expectation of what dogs should be** rather than what they are.

You may have seen in previous blogs us talk about [The Ladder of Aggression](#). This term was invented by [British behaviourist Kendal Shepherd in 2009 and adopted by the BSAVA](#) (British Small Animal Veterinary Association); that a dog can both go up and down rung by rung rather than leap from top to bottom. So most behaviourists use this idea to show adopters how dog actions and emotions can rise and fall like going up and down a ladder. And it is a good start! Most of us can relate to this idea and start to understand that **dogs being 'naughty' doesn't just come from nowhere** and there's always a reason, we just need to to work out what it is.

What is the Hill of Reaction?

We've taken this idea and **tried to make it more dog focused**. This diagram devised below by our behaviourist uses the natural needs and wants of a *dog on an undirected walk* (left to wander as they wish) and using *weather symbols to match their actions to their moods*. *Sunny is relaxed and calm: storm clouds represent extreme levels of stress*. We have combined these ideas because dogs are affected far more than humans by weather so it represents *how humans can miss dog signals*, as dogs simply absorb far more than we do from their surroundings, and as a result we may miss their signals, that are called **microexpressions** and **macroexpressions**. We'll talk about what these are later.

However they usually do not miss our expressions and body language unless they are in total 'shut down' which is common in

Neutral Relaxation on the left and right at the bottom of **The Hill of Reaction** is the perfect description of a dog in their positive 'usual' state. They are literally *in balance*, from the weight on their limbs to the face, ears, body and tail, showing friendly and welcoming body language by being **soft** and moving **gently**. Any other emotional state of the dog is an *escalation from neutral, or an exaggeration of default posture* as expressed in our behaviourist's dog actions table(s). Therefore using

- The Hill of Reaction diagram above
- The Weather Moods diagram below
- The Dog Character Model diagram below
- and The Table of Behaviour at the end of the blog

we can go some way to assessing the actual emotional state of a canine from their body language.

Again, there are **three 'layers' to decoding your dog** in this way!

- calming signals,
- body posture
- and facial expressions (or microexpressions).

What are calming signals?

Simply, they are **things your dog does to relieve stress building up in them.**

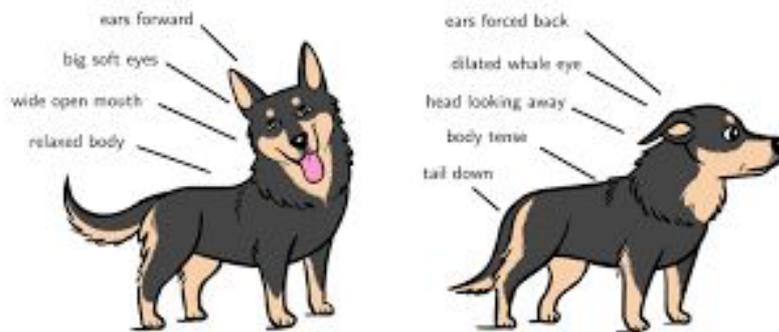
Analysing canine calming signals (also called distraction behaviour) involves a *constant and evolving overview* of the entire body, nose to tail, but focusing in on the ears, eyes, mouth and tail then applying those to the position of the body. Excessive licking (of the nose) and yawning frequently when not obviously tired are perhaps most common and most easily recognised by the human carer but there are many more expressions dogs exhibit, all of which *make them feel calmer due to a build up of stress.* **The response is a reaction to their environment.** As we have seen in the picture above,

stressed eyes can be **staring hard** at something, show wide (dilated) pupils, **look 'tight'** around the sockets, or you can see **more white** than usual (whale or half moon eye.) Anxious mouths can **drool, pant, lick excessively, lips and muzzles** more inclined to **wrinkle, or 'smile'**- [appeasement body language](#) or trying to make sure nothing and nobody can hurt them in the situation they are in by use of deliberately non threatening signals to humans and other animals. Scared bodies can **crouch and tense, or freeze**, even have an **'arousal wee'** or may **stretch or shake** more than usual. We can also see **how often** they feel they need to do things like this in different situations as well compared to 'normal', to have an informed 'guess' at how stressed they are feeling in a situation.

What is body posture?

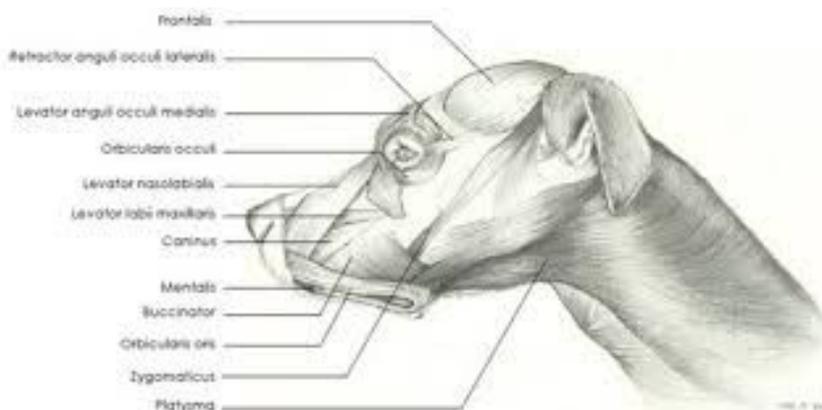
This is where you start to look at the bigger picture and [check out the whole body, adding up all the body positions, of your dog](#). Another term for this is **macroexpressions**. Macro means 'on a large scale' rather than the smaller body parts of eyes, ears, mouth and so on. The most obvious sign of body stress in a dog is them **stiffening** up from a **soft body**- shoulders, legs and back, right down to the tail, and/or leaning forward, as well as starting to pull back lips to show teeth. Thinking *hackles means 'aggression' is horribly outdated* and human focused as our [blog](#) on them shows. If we look at this picture, we can see we have to **combine lots of dog body actions to work out** (in this case at least) if your dog relaxed or not.

Smiling vs Warning



What are microexpressions?

This is when we go 'small' (micro) and focus in on small facial details. It does not mean you get very close to the dog, especially if you suspect they are stressed. Stay at least an old school ruler (12 inches/30cm) at a minimum length from your dog's mouth when assessing, and try to stay 1m away when practical especially when your dog first comes home. Above we looked at microexpression 'signals' around the eyes that could suggest stress.



The soft tissue on a dog's face, like humans, create canine facial expressions. Dogs do these expressions far more around humans than other dogs.

So facial expressions are at the 'micro' end of canine body language. Here problems arise as not only do dogs mimic their

humans to try and communicate with us, and appease us with 'grins', they also have evolved more eye area musculature to better show humans what they 'mean'.

But while facial muscles, ears, eyes, lips and position of head are important, we need to look at the face and body posture together as we learn our dog to get a complete picture.

Again some kind of **Natural Relaxation** position of the facial features is needed- and to note changes, however small.

For example:

- A long eared dog has less control over their ears to show stress or fear, and fear hackles won't be visible, but you will see changes of expression around the ears and outer eyes.
- Or a 'ten to two' or 'bat ears' or 'airplane ears' position to tell you they are uncertain if it's not how their ears are at rest.

And so, of course, it's not just about the eyes, or any part of the face by itself. All facial expression should be seen in relation to what other parts of the dog's head are doing. And the scientific method of measuring the facial action of dogs is called the "Dog Facial Action Coding System" or DogFACS.

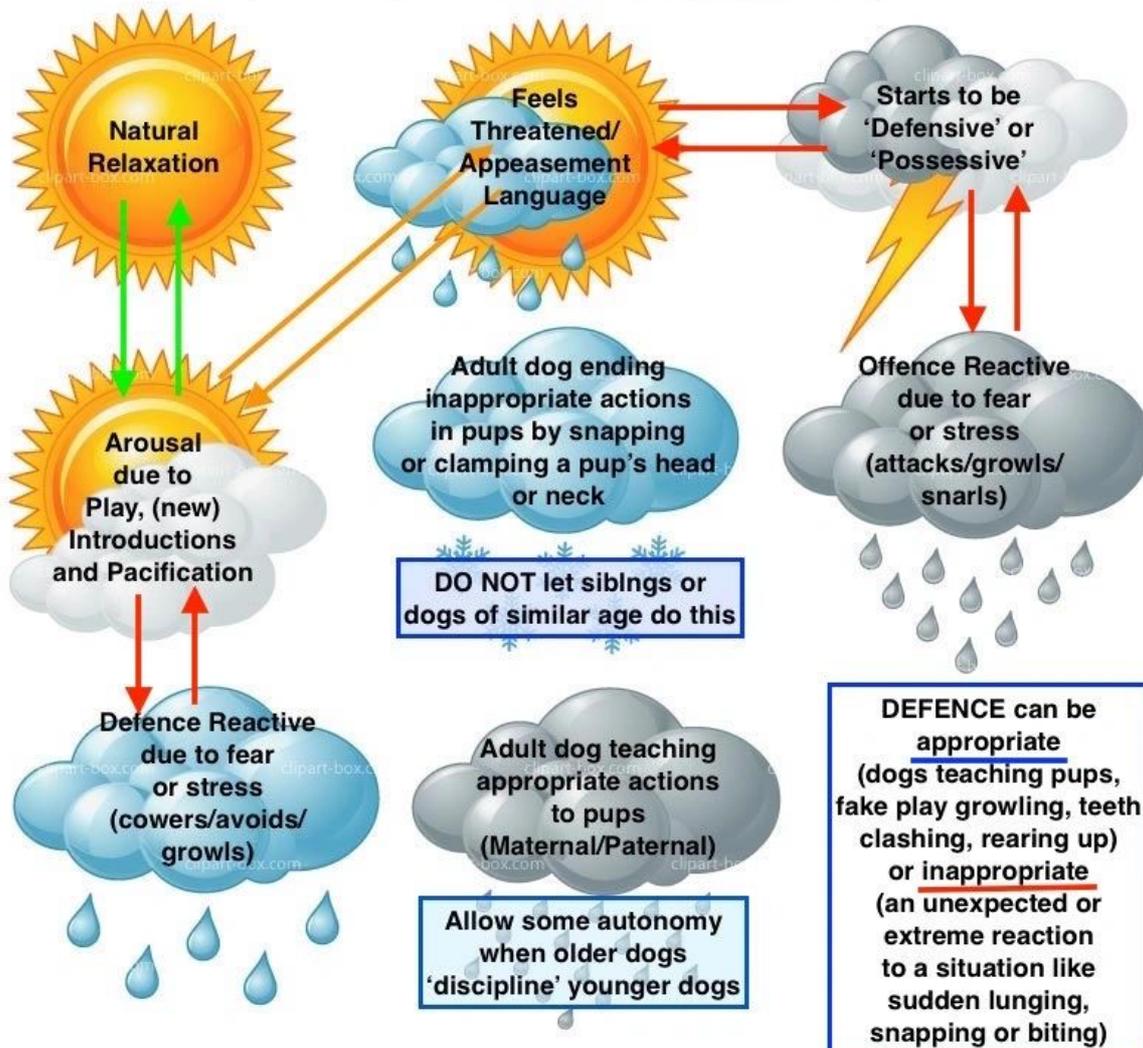
Created in 1978 by Ekman and Friesen, it was used for years to study human expressions first, then was adapted to dogs and other mammals. But **DogFACS does not detect emotions.** It notes and gives a possible explanation as to what level of stress your dog is feeling and possibly why. Although most adopters feel their pets show emotions through their facial expressions, the fact is dogs adapt their faces to talk to us, they **aren't 'natural' reactions or emotions, but are actions as they try and communicate with you.**

The terms on **The Hill of Reaction** diagram therefore are macroexpressions (whole body

language) first and foremost.

But they are always and must always be seen as part of a constant succession of escalating (rising stress) and de-escalating (decreasing stress) *positive high emotions like excitement or anticipation, called 'eustresses' or negative low emotions like fear and anxiety, called 'distresses'*; going from small scale facial expressions and 'zooming out' to see the whole dog, as the 'moods' always come out in dog behaviour if you know what to look for!

The Hill of Reaction Weather Moods



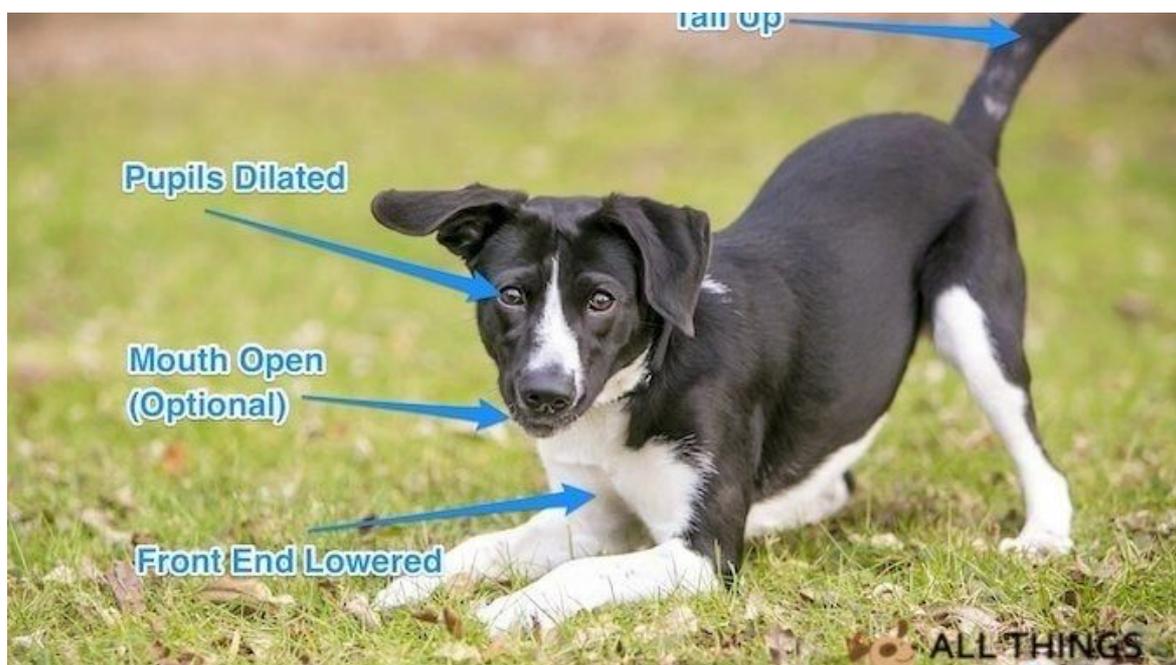
Graphic by S McCarthy 2022

With **Neutral Relaxation** as the ideal starting point for your pup, various potential 'pathways' can be seen through changing weather as well as up and down the Hill. When a dog is introduced to a (new) situation whether that be a person, a place or another animal an eustress (positive) response would be **Play** and a distress response would be **Arousal**.' However, it's not that simple as

arousal is not always a negative emotion.

What is play?

'Play' as a term perhaps is easier to understand immediately than 'arousal', although both are behaviours *humans share with canines*, and expressed in similar ways. Simply put, **'play' is an active, positive engagement** between canines, **for enjoyment** rather than a specific purpose, or between canines and humans. However, as can be seen in our [toys blog](#) and [play blog](#), [we yet again as humans dictate what is 'good' and 'bad' play based on our psychology and motivations, not the dog's](#). 'Good' play is often described by humans as "“enthusiastic”, “having fun”... and feeling “really connected”". Adopters need to understand that actions such as **growling and teeth baring** behaviours is **not** by default an indicator of **negative reactivity**, but rather, **normal canine behaviour** rather than 'bad play'. 'Play' stances are easy to detect



and work out *from a macro (body) to a micro (face)* level- everything in the **body** is 'loose' or 'soft'; they can 'bow' or mirror the other dog, and if the size difference is large, 'self sabotage' by lying down or rolling over to even out the dynamic between a small and large canine.

While *well adjusted and well socialised dogs will self calm* and when they feel arousal rising, and *remove themselves* from the stressor, **they do not come into the human home 'naturally' knowing how to do this.** It is therefore the responsibility of the adopter to learn the merry-go-round context of play and arousal in their dogs before misinterpreted signals become ingrained and problematic. Hackles by themselves are not always a sign of negative arousal, but they are a sign of arousal- and may be invisible on a stressed long haired dog, or displaying on a part of a dog that tends to suggest excitement rather than hostility. *Problems only arise when the eustress becomes distress and escalates to Arousal.*

What is (negative) Arousal?

The dog's *entire* body language will change from soft to stiff due to distress.



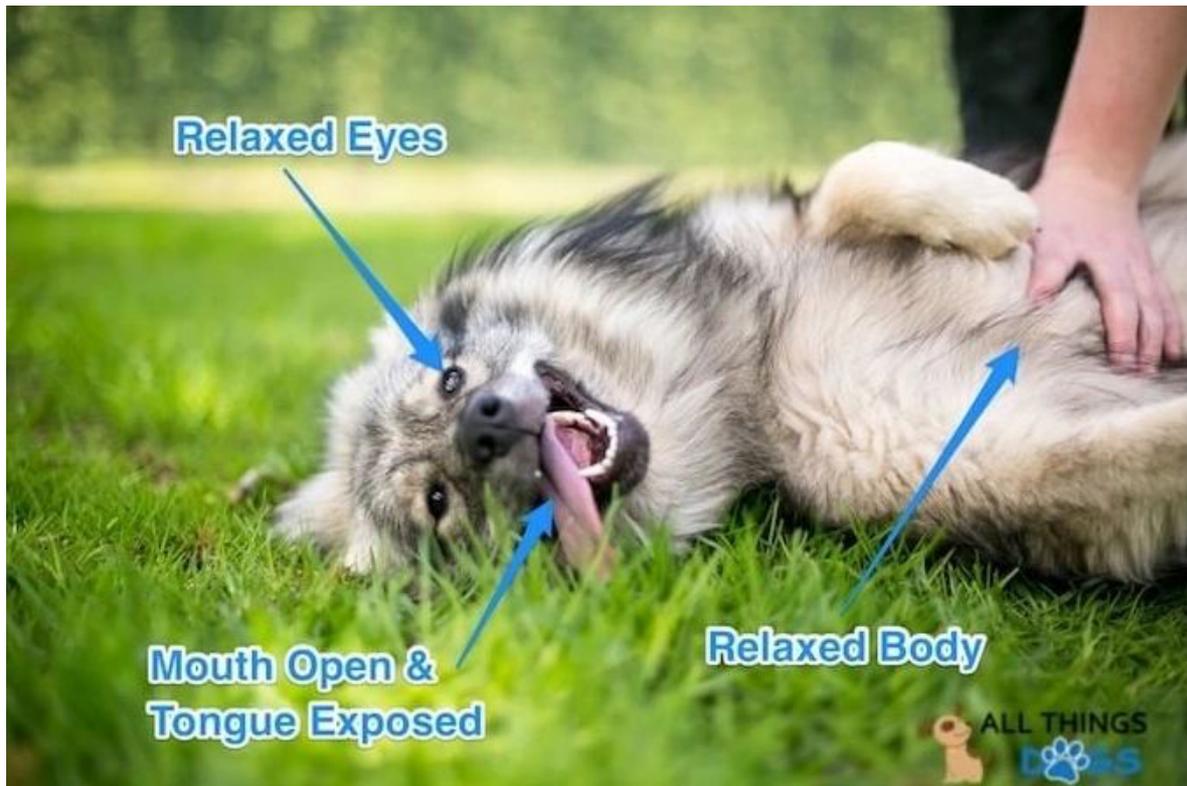
We might see **hard staring** at the stressor, or **leaning towards** the stressor. But we must remember that *'arousal'* is just the natural development of any feeling or emotional response to your surroundings whether you're a dog or a human.

The more negatively intense those feelings get in the canine and the higher the distress levels, the *higher the heart rate*, and the *body and face 'tighten'*, even if the basic body positions on first glance appear similar. Or a dog might start **nipping**, **jumping up and grabbing** at their human play partner when the play was not over stimulating to the human, but it clearly was to the dog.

So *'arousal'* is a **scale of reaction and behaviour** that can become **out of control** if not **reinforced and guided by the human carers**, but is **not a negative behaviour in itself**.

What is Pacification/Submission?

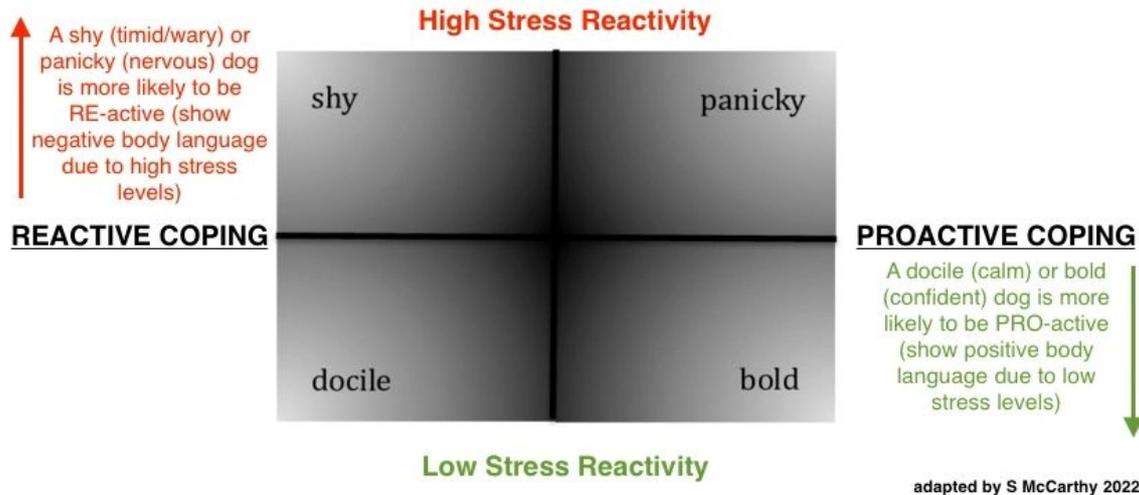
Alternatively, a dog may move to **Submission** (I am safe to be with/am I safe with you?) and/or **Pacification** (keeping the peace) body positions instead of **Play** or **Arousal**.



This is 'soft' or Proactive Submission/Pacifications- where all the body and face is soft.

from **Neutral Relaxation** to **Introductions** or **Play** like on the **Hill of Reaction** diagram. The clue is when they do this far more often than in 'normal' dog breaks during Play. Just as a *high held tail* can be the response of a *confident dog* when in Arousal positive or negative, (excessive) Submission and Pacification can and do occur when a dog is naturally more shy or gentle in personality.

Koolhaas' 2010 Canine Axis of Emotion and Coping Likelihood Model



The idea here is dogs we think of as 'shy' will **avoid the situation causing them distress by reactive coping** as Koolhaas called it, or be *passive and practice **Submission** and/ or **Pacification***, but a 'docile' dog is often passive and shows their belly in a state of (positive) eustress. In comparison, a 'bold' dog is more likely to be **proactive** and approach, with very different body language, like Play. But with a 'panicky' dog, they could mimic the same body language but are being **reactive**.



Here we have 'hard', scared or Reactive Submission/Pacification. Ears may go back from a default position when a submissive dog encounters a stressor, or they may avoid eye contact. They may crouch, lie lower than usual, (here we are moving towards Pacification behaviour, which is an escalation of submissive behaviour as their first quiet overtures did not relieve their stress) lick their nose much more than usual or raise a paw as well as the more well-known roll onto the back.

With any of these actions,
the possibility of getting stressed enough to go into **Threat** mode could happen to any dog no matter what their basic personality, but dogs already **reactive coping** of course would be far more likely to become very stressed and react negatively to the world currently around them.

Submission is possibly the *most misunderstood of dog body language* by humans-

not all rolls onto the back mean the dog wishes a human to rub their stomach!

Some submissive or 'levelling out' behaviour like the 'self sabotage' where a bigger dog will fake submitting to a smaller dog by rolling over and being vulnerable, as talked about earlier is quite 'normal' and needs to be taken into account.

But if ***immediate submission becomes the dog's 'norm' to something or anything new or stressful***, this is when the actions become *an issue for both canine and human carer*. It is not always as simple as accepting your dog is 'naturally' submissive or 'dominant' (and dominance is not a popular theory of dog behaviour any more after extensive studies), as it is *just as likely to be environment as character of the dog* that's making it happen.

If your dog starts doing this, or doing it all the time, they are way too stressed and you'll need to

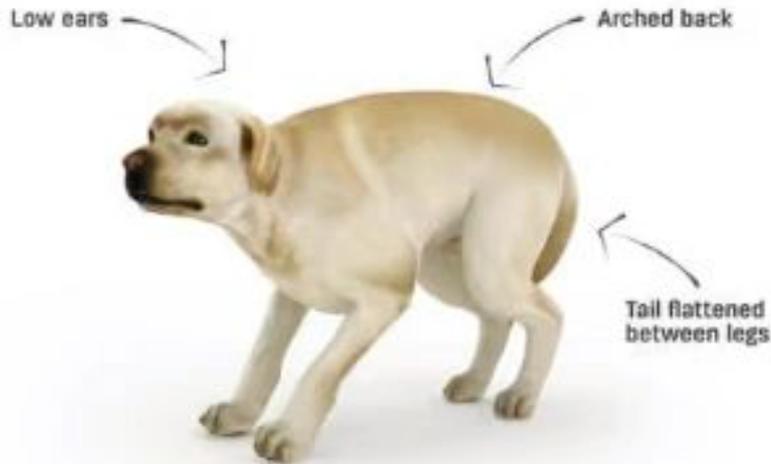
- find ways to **distract visually and relax** them, like throwing a ball or stick,
- or **use smell** with a treat (really stressed dogs tend not to take a treat)
- **use sound- reassurance** with the **voice** and your **body language** (try not to fuss them too much but brief positive contact is great)
- or simply **removing them** from the situation. (Then slowly reintroduce, with lots of positive reinforcement.)

What is a Threat and how might a dog Defend against it?

The ***fear*** felt by a canine when encountering stressors can not only exhibit **Threat** or **Defence** macro (body) and microexpressions (face) but also often rush through or go past altogether the more healthy reactions and counter reaction of Play then disengaging to process and rest, as in The Hill of Reaction.

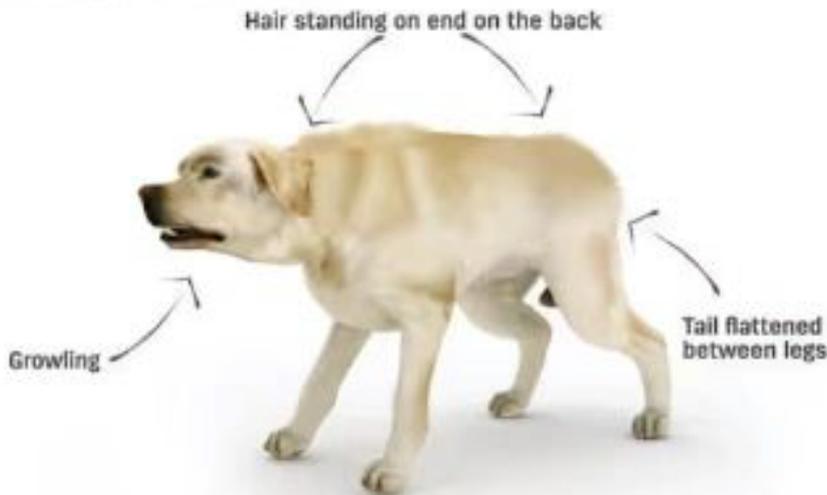
Here the canine is not 'coping' at all.

SCARED



I'm scared...

DEFENSIVE FEAR



I'm frightened and defensive

What are the differences between these two pictures? How could you react to help destress your dog when they show this kind of body language?

They are very scared, even if their bodies look 'angry' or 'vicious' to humans.

The combination of **everything** they can smell hear, and

see (and usually in that order) is **simply too much** for the dog, and they may respond to situations both 'good' and 'bad' with more and more stress

- further hardening of facial features (especially round the eyes and mouth)
- escalating growls to **lip curling and snarls**, with the tongue pulled back out of the way
- or even (anal)_gland secretion.

OFFENSIVE REACTIVITY



It does not take much, when a dog is already scared, for them to go from defensive to offensive body language.

If a dog is showing levels of **extreme Arousal** like this then correct interpretation of the body and face is never more important by the human carer.

However, if the dog is reacting this 'badly' it suggests a breakdown of the or lack of a bond of trust between the human and the dog.

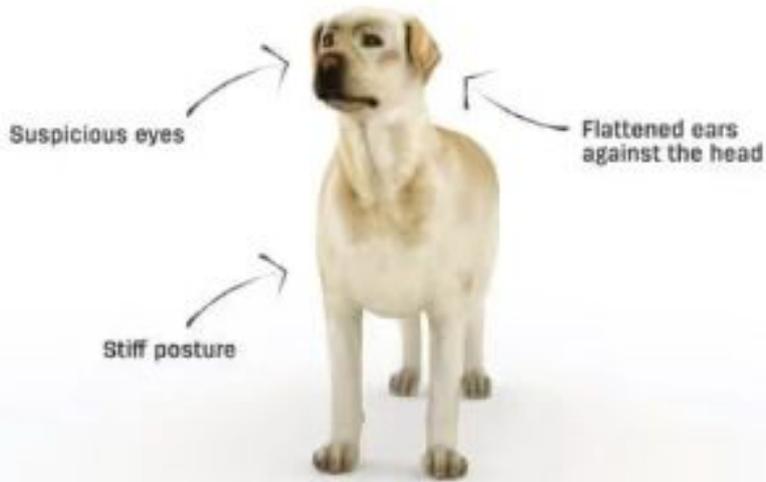
The dog is so wound up at this point they are often too stressed

to be able and sometimes become unwilling to *communicate its distress 'honestly'* and in a way their carer will understand or recognise the signals for what they are in good time. Their body language can **flip from snarling to *displacement activities/ calming signals*** (as they try to calm down) **and back again** (as they fail to destress) like we've talked about earlier. The behaviour is often very contradictory and stressful to the human by this point, and this is when you hear things like 'they snapped at me out of nowhere!' when nothing could be further from the truth.

Other **mixed signals** are

- *yawning or falling asleep* when *not tired* (because they are trying to process something overwhelming)

SUSPICIOUS



I'm wary

CONFLICTED



I'm not comfortable

- showing a mixture of body language you have worked out mean different things in your dog over time, which can happen when a dog learns to be **suspicious** of all (new) experiences.
- or they may *obsessively lick or groom* themselves

- *wanting to be close* to you and get **clingy** (like in our ['limpeting' blog](#)) or *turning away* if you try and show them affection
- or start getting/escalating *destructive behaviour* like chewing and toileting in the home when they are toilet trained and showing very *submissive body language* when caught or when the damage is found later on.

The only sensible response from the human carer would be to **redirect or remove the canine from the stressor** (location, other dog, human etc) or the other way round especially if the stressor comes into the dog's home rather than them being outdoors on the Hill of Reaction), by way of **distracting**, then in the longer term **desensitising and counterconditioning**. We'll talk about this bit more in another blog.

If the dog is stuck at the top of The Hill of Reaction, with the emotional storm clouds gathering above their heads, not sure of who to trust, they could be reacting

- in **self defence** to something happening or something they think will happen because they're *expecting the worst* all the time;
- they may be **resource guarding** because they've had things taken from them for no reason that makes sense to them, been *punished* by having their things taken instead of using distraction methods, or never had things of their own before and have been given too much too soon in the new home
- or they may **feel out of control** in the situation they are in
- in a very negative or exaggerated Arousal state as well the possibility of the mixed signals. For example, leaning towards the stressor could develop into *charging or attacking*: and the tail *stops wagging* entirely and *stiffens* along with the rest of them.

So due to *fear escalation* that is **not soothed**

by their or their **human's actions and/or reactions**, a dog can go on the 'offensive' or show 'defensive' behaviours to the human gaze, and will always display it in their bodies and faces.

All these behaviours are linked and have been combined and summarised in the table below by our behaviourist. Note **how many behaviours and emotional responses and assessments cross over in canine body language** in the table. This is why we, as the human carer, must always contextualise as well assess progressively, keep up to date with research, and evolve our preconceptions of what dogs want and need.

	eyes	ears	mouth	hackles	tail	legs	back	paws	head	belly
Neutral Relaxation 	soft	up	open	no	wag	equal	soft	flat	up	not shown
Arousal 	enlarged	move forward	tensing	maybe	stiff wag	stiff forwards	still	braced	lowered or teeth	not shown
Threat/Stress 	hard stare	more forward	teeth warning	likely	stiff no wag	more forward	tense	braced	tilted back	not shown
Pacification 	blink or squint	back	closed, may see tongue tip	unlikely or ambiguous	low slow wag	stretch out (play mimic or stress)	crouch	one raised	drops often	may show
Submission 	no eye contact	back	open, 'smiling'	not usually	tucked	minic play	on the floor	touching you or other animal	turned away	showing
Defence (fear) 	pupils dilated	back	tense wrinkled nose	yes	down and tense	weight on back legs	crouch	pushing you or scary thing away	down	lying on floor usually but not always
Defence (maternal) 	focused	varies will flatten if HUMANS TOO CLOSE	STOP growl warning-mouth clamp (mum)	not usually unless HUMAN in her space	puppy tail tucked	puppy legs go to the floor	pup is down mum above or turned	pup can raise a paw in 'apology'	down (both)	shown perhaps in pup but not mum
Introduction 	part closed, soft	back (unhappy) starts to go forward (happy) too forward =danger sign	may mouth or lick other dog	BE WATCHFUL	down	slow wag, down (unhappy) wag speeds up (happy)	soft if happy, tense if not	maybe one paw up	up if happy, down if not	not usually
Play 	soft	up	relaxed tongue/lip	maybe excited	up soft wag	stretch	bowing	stretched or 'padding'	low because bowing	can be shown
Neutral Relaxation 	soft	up	open	no	wag	equal	soft	flat	up	not shown

graphic created by S McCarthy 2022

EQUITY BY DESIGN- inclusive information by default.

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