

You Don't Have to Be Psychic - Understanding the Language of Dogs and Cats

*Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB, DACAW
Ceva Animal Health
Valarie.tynes@ceva.com*

Learning to read body language is critical if you wish to be able to work with dogs and cats safely. Most aggression in the veterinary clinic is a result of fear and anxiety. Recognizing those emotional states before the pet becomes extremely aggressively aroused enables the handler to adjust their techniques, or in some cases stop what they are doing completely, in order to decrease fear and anxiety. Staying calm ourselves and recognizing aggression for what it is, a distance-increasing form of communication, can help to increase our empathy and understanding. Then we can approach restraint with the pets' mental, as well as physical, welfare in mind.

Fear and Anxiety

- Two differing emotional states *that animals have no control over!*
- Result in physiological changes.
- Punishment will make them worse!

Anxiety - the anticipation of danger that is not yet present. It may be unknown, simply imagined or real but not yet occurring. The individual is "worried" about its impending occurrence.

Fear - the emotion that induces an individual to avoid anything that it perceives as a present danger in its environment. The key word here is "perceives." We must understand, as humans, that just because we see no danger, does not mean that the animal sees no danger.

Phobia - persistent and excessive fear that is out of proportion to the actual threat presented by the stimulus causing the phobia. When a dog breaks its teeth and nails off in a panicked attempt to escape confinement due to its fear of a thunderstorm or other loud noises, then the fear of the storm or noise can easily be defined as a phobia.

Physiological signs of fear and anxiety –

- Increased respiration rate
- Elevated heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Panting
- Salivating
- Trembling
- Dilated pupils

Visual cues – Lowered head and neck

Ears pulled back closer to the head

Tucked tail

Avoidance of eye contact - "whale eye"

More subtle visual cues referred to as displacement behaviors.

Displacement behaviors are simply behaviors similar to "fidgeting" that say "I am not comfortable with what is going on here." They are the behaviors exhibited by an animal that

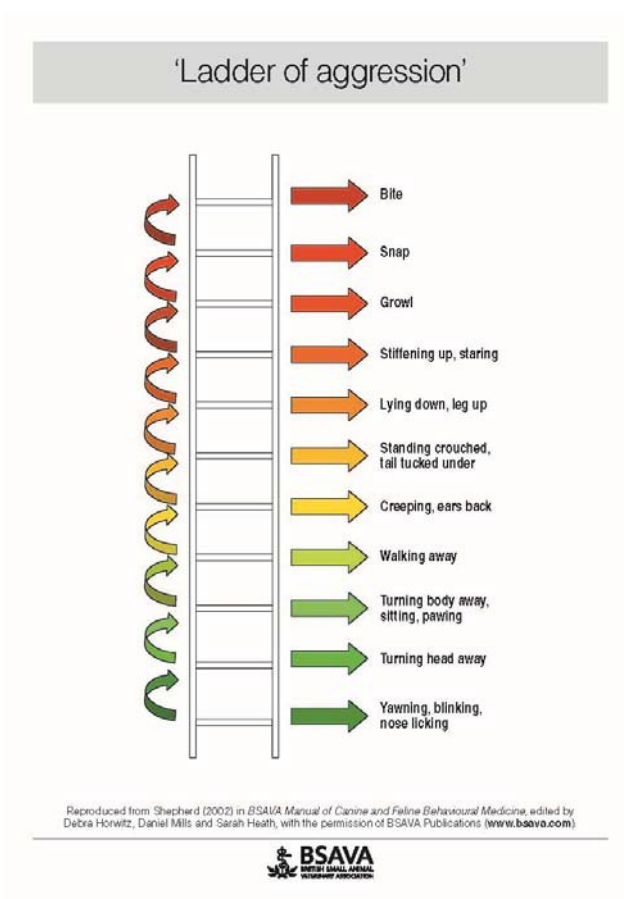
seem out of context for the situation; behaviors they perform because they probably do not feel comfortable enough to do what they really want to do!

Common displacement behaviors – Self-grooming behaviors

- Repeated lip licking
- Scratching or licking at themselves
- Yawning

If none of these demonstrations succeeds in stopping the approach of a threat, then what happens next will vary depending on the dog's individual personality and experiences. Some dogs will try very hard to escape before resorting to more aggressive threats while others may progress immediately to snarling, growling and attempting to bite. The "ladder of aggression" which is attached here will be discussed in more detail during the presentation but what is most important to keep in mind is that every individual will "climb the ladder" at their own pace; not every individual will necessarily go straight to the top and some individuals will move up and down.

Lots of individual features factor into every different animals' response to a threat. Also keep in mind that ideally one would not consider any rung on the ladder to be green. From the very bottom, every signal given by a dog should be considered a warning sign (a yellow flag at least) telling you that the dog is not comfortable with what is happening.



Canine Visual Cues

Another visual cue that we should pay attention to in dogs is their overall degree of tension in their body. For example, a dog with a loose jaw and open mouth is likely to be relaxed. A tightly closed mouth indicates a certain amount of tension. A relaxed dog that is “happy to see you” will have squinty eyes that wrinkle at the corners. A startled, alert or frightened dog will have wide open rounded eyes.



The tension lines behind this dog's mouth indicate some degree of anxiety.

When a dog is panting happily, there is no tension seen around the mouth



This dog is very relaxed, excited and panting happily.

It should be kept in mind that a wagging tail only indicates a dog's desire to interact! It does not suggest that the dog is either friendly or aggressive. An upright, stiff, wagging tail is common in a confident aggressive dog but is likely to be seen along with a stiffened body posture.

A friendly dog will have a loose, relaxed tail that wags the entire hindquarters with it. A slightly lowered wagging tail is commonly seen when a dog is attempting to initiate play. The tail that is

much lower and wagging slowly, if at all, suggests that the dog is unsure about the interaction. A fearful dog will tuck its tail between its legs and hold it relatively still.



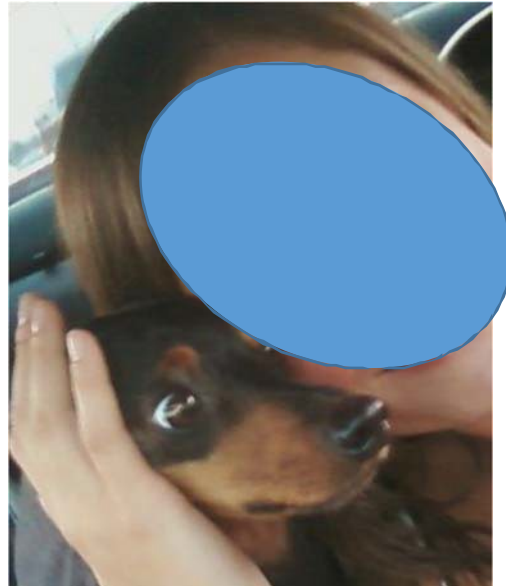
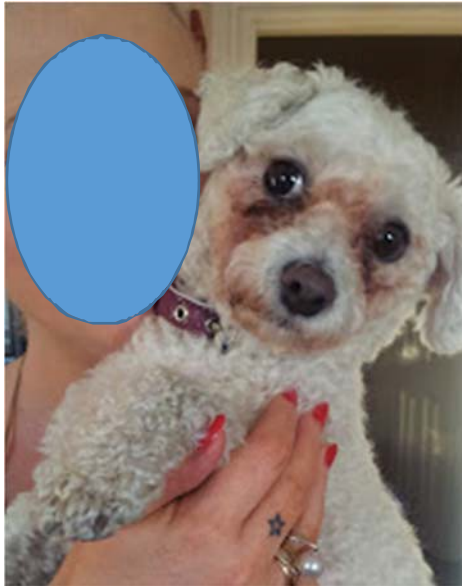
The tails of both of these dogs are about half way between high and low. They are just meeting each other so greeting calmly and waiting to see which way the other will respond. The uplifted paw of the dog on the right also suggests some degree of uncertainty.

The degree of body tension can be useful to note when a dog rolls over in response to your approach. Many humans believe that when a dog rolls over, this is an invitation for you to swoop in for a belly rub. However, you may note from the ladder of aggression that lying down with the leg up is mid-way up the ladder. Many dogs roll over as a part of their appeasement display when they feel threatened. An appeasement display is a behavior demonstrated by an animal in an attempt to "turn off" an aggressive threat so when a dog rolls over and offers you its belly it is just as likely to be saying "Stop, I am no threat to you! Back off!" as they are to be saying, "Come on! I love a good belly rub!"



Notice the difference in the overall body posture between the two dogs in the pictures above. The dog on the left has rolled over as a part of an appeasement display. You can see her anxiety in her face and ears. Her tail is down between her legs. The dog on the right has rolled over in play. Her entire body is loose and relaxed.

Other behaviors that humans find perfectly normal but dogs find threatening include hugging. Many people hug their dogs without ever really noting if the dog enjoys the behavior very much. Sadly, many bites to children occur because they try to hug dogs or they approach them at eye level. Due to their stature, children are frequently bitten on the face and seriously injured by dogs simply due to this inability to speak the same language.

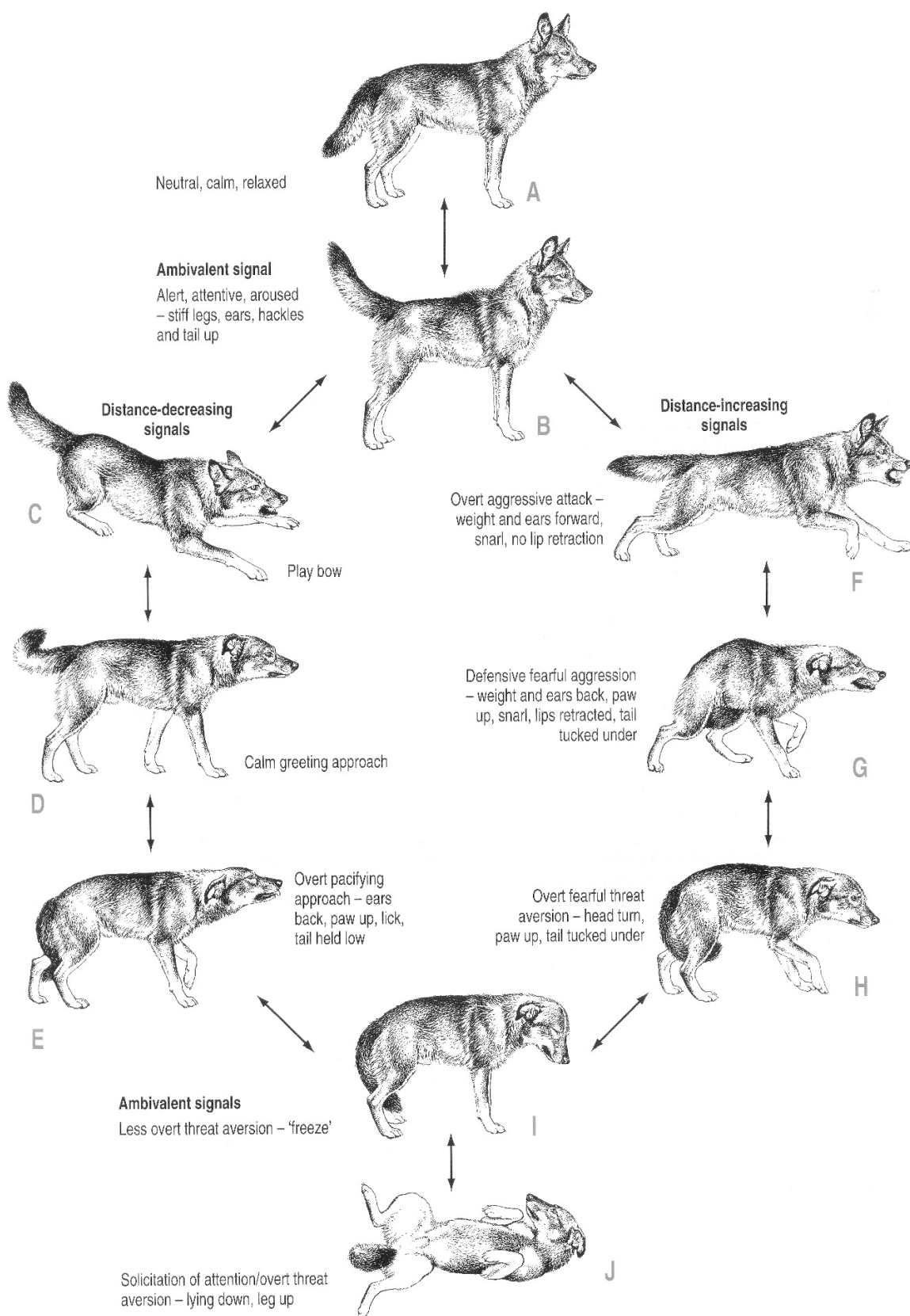


You should be able to see that the dogs in the two pictures above are very uncomfortable. The whites of their eyes are showing and the poodle on the left is visibly tense with ears pulled back.

The diagram to the right gives you some additional, excellent images of canine visual cues and how they change with a dog's emotional state. Don't attend too much to the exact descriptions given by the author of this diagram. Sometimes defining these cues can be somewhat subjective because dogs can also demonstrate mixed signals in some situations. What is important to be aware of is that it is rare for a dog in our care to be very confidently aggressive or assertive, and "dominant" is certainly never an appropriate term to use when referring to a dog's behavior when directed towards humans.

Dominance is a term that refers to a relationship between individuals and these are relationships that develop between conspecifics. Dominance is not a behavioral trait nor is it a personality trait and we should avoid using this term inappropriately due to its history of being used as an excuse for a great deal of aversive and even abusive dog training methods.

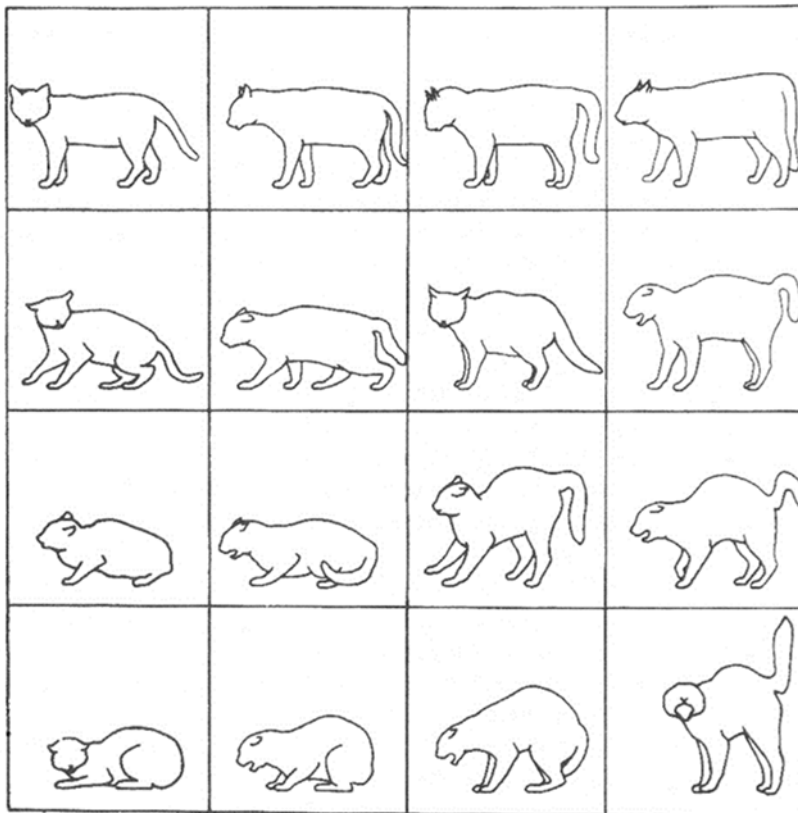
Veterinarians should remain aware that most animals will try to avoid overt physical conflict when they can by using visual cues but the only way this works is if we pay attention to and respond appropriately to the visual cues they send us.



Feline Visual Communication

When trying to read the visual cues cats send, it is critical to observe the entire body, not just the posture, not just the eyes or ears and not just the tail. All of these cues need to be observed simultaneously.

In the graphic below, the cat on the upper left is alert and as you view the images from left to right across the top, you see the cat becoming increasingly threatening.

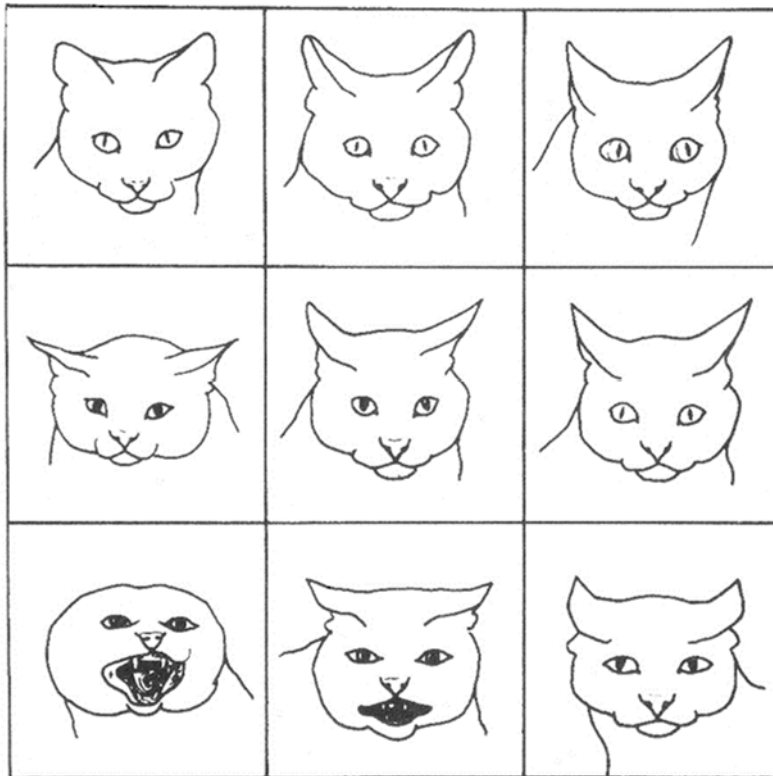


As you may note, this offensively aggressive cat walks on tiptoe with its head down. The cat's hind legs are longer than its fore legs so the cat will appear to be slanting downward from rump to head. The tail is held down but slightly arched away from the hocks and partially piloerected. As you view the pictures from the top upper left to the bottom left, you see the cat becoming increasingly fearful. This fearful cat is attempting to appear small so as to avoid a perceived threat. This cat may freeze but if it feels that the threat is not going away, this freezing behavior can change to a more defensively aggressive behavior and the cat will roll over on its back and use all four feet to keep the threat away. Regardless of how scary this cat may look keep in mind that these behaviors are motivated by fear.

The picture on the lower right depicts a cat that is likely feeling threatened but is willing to use overt physical aggression if needed. This cat presents the classic picture of the "Halloween cat". All four feet will be drawn underneath the body and the cat will stand erect with an arched back

and tail piloerected. While the tail in this diagram is upright, it has been suggested by others that cats in this position are just as likely to have their tail in an inverted “U” position.

Other aspects of tail position that should be noted: the tail of the relaxed cat will hang down straight and the tip may be wagged when the cat is stalking. As the cat’s attention is attracted the tail will go up. A cat that is interested in interacting will usually approach with an upright tail and the tail may curl over slightly at the top. Kittens, in particular, when interested in play often approach another cat with their tail curled up and over their back. A cat with a rapidly twitching tail is at the very least, agitated and should be handled cautiously.



In this second diagram, depicting the facial expressions of the cat, we again see that the cat in the upper left-hand corner is the “neutral” cat. This cat’s ears are up and the pinna rotated forward. As you move from the upper left to the upper right, you see the cat becoming increasingly alert and agitated. The ears of this more confident cat are up and the pinna are rotated to the side. From the upper left moving down to the lower left you see a cat becoming more fearful. This defensively aggressive cat’s ears are flattened back on its head. On the lower right is a cat demonstrating some mixed signals. This cat displays some features of the fearful cat with its ears being partially lowered, but they are also similar to the offensively aggressive cat’s ears since the openings are turned slightly sideways. This most likely represents a threatened cat that is simply not afraid to fight if necessary.

Staring in cats, just as in dogs, is a threat. Cats that are trying to avoid a threat from another individual will try hard to avoid eye contact by pointing their head away or to the side.

The pupils are important, although you may not always be able to, or want to, get close enough to see them. Dilated pupils are more typical of a fearful animal that is more physiologically aroused. Constricted pupils are reflective of less arousal so are more confident in the aggressive cat that is not feeling particularly threatened. The fearful, aggressive cat is more likely to have its mouth open in a snarl and hiss or spit. The offensively aggressive cat is likely to be silent.

Whiskers are another feature that may not be easily or readily apparent but an offensively threatening cat's whiskers are more likely to be directed forward. The whiskers of the more fearful cat will be drawn back closer to its face.

It is important to understand that the fractious cat, like the dog, is most likely afraid and must be handled accordingly. Punishment must be avoided. Punishing the cat for its behavior will only result in increased fear and anxiety, making your job more difficult, not less. Sometimes fearful animals can be distracted by engaging them in behaviors that are incompatible with feeling anxious or afraid. For cats, attempting to get them to chase a feather or string type of toy can help relax them. Special treats can also be offered but many cats will be so anxious that they will not eat or play. In these cases, try to avoid particularly fear evoking stimuli such as direct eye contact and bending over or reaching over the animal.

As part of the medical community, let's include not only excellent self- education and self- awareness on the subject of how animals communicate, but improved public education as well. Every time we place a pet in a position where it must use aggression, we have given it a learning experience, possibly a rather traumatic experience, that it will never forget, and we have increased the chance that next time it is afraid it will call upon the memory of that coping mechanism first and be much more willing to use aggression to defend itself. The knowledge of dog and cat body language and how our pets communicate must be spread to more pet owners as well, since this miscommunication results in so many of the problem behaviors and broken human-animal bonds that lead people to euthanize or abandon their pet.

Useful Resources

Handelman B. Canine Behavior – A photo illustrated handbook. Woof and Word Press, 2008. Houpt KA. Domestic Animal Behavior for Veterinarians and Animal Scientists. Wiley - Blackwell. Sixth ed. 2018.