

Opinion



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ogs have evolved from wolves. Dogs were domesticated before horses or goats. There is archaeological evidence that dogs were the first animals domesticated by humans more than 30,000 years ago.

So, we, as humans, have a long history of living with dogs. Early dogs learned to scavenge around human camps and eventually formed a closer bond with humans and human communities.

Today, dogs are often considered part of the 'family' as people form strong emotional bonds with their canine companions.

It is important to socialise your dog so that it can behave well and fit in with your family. Socialisation means exposing them to a variety of environments, people and other animals so that they feel comfortable and confident in different situations. It can also help prevent fearfulness and aggression.

Puppies have a critical period between three to 17 weeks of age when they are more receptive to new experiences and learning, so socialising with your animal during that period is the most effective. However, socialisation should continue throughout a dog's life to re-

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inforce positive behaviours.

WITHUS?

Dogs have evolved to use both verbal and non-verbal body language. Dogs have learned to read human body language, facial expressions and our emotions without even knowing it.

Research has shown dogs have the average intelligence as a three to four-year-old human does. Verbal communication, such as parking, whining and growling, is their way of letting us know how they feel. A dog may bark to warn you of danger, discipline younger dogs, or warn you of strangers.

They also use body language such as tail wagging, ear position and eye contact to let us know how they feel. Facial expressions, like a relaxed mouth or a tense jaw, can also show how they feel.

Dogs can also use actions such as bringing a toy when they want to play or nudging their food bowl when hungry.

Dogs have a keen sense of smell and can indicate where something is located, for example, dogs at the airport looking for undesirable substances, assisting the police with forensic investigations or even locating explosives in war zones.

It is important to understand these different types of communication to understand your dog and develop a strong bond with your dog.

Animals Fiji Why does your dog act that way?

GREEN ZONE SIGNS

- Yawning, nose licking, blinking. Although Yawning can indicate tiredness, a dog can also use this to relieve discomfort and tension in its jaw. Licking their nose is also used to calm themselves and reduce discomfort. Blinking can also be a signal that the dog is starting to feel stressed.
- Looking away: Just as humans sometimes turn their heads away from a person when they don't want to talk to them - dogs will do a similar thing by moving their heads and looking away. If they only look to the side and show the whites of their eyes, this is a clear sign of discomfort.
- Turning the body away: When a dog turns his whole body away and starts pawing, it indicates that your dog is uncomfortable, and you should move your dog away from the source of stress

At this stage on the aggression ladder, you can still easily control your pet's behaviour and guide it to a less stressful situation.

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The 'dog's ladder of aggression' is a concept used to describe the various levels of aggression that a

YELLOW/ORANGE ZONE SIGNS

- Walking away: At this stage, your dog will want to move away. Allow this to happen because if you don't, it could result in a rapid rate of increase in aggression.
- Creeping, ears back: Often dogs sink low to the ground to escape the source of stress or appear smaller. This is a very expressive way of trying to get away and is often accompanied by lowering the ears and showing the whites of the eyes with a sideways
- Standing crouched with tail tucked under: In this stage, the dog is trying to appear smaller and less noticeable. It is a clear sign of nervousness.
- Lying down, with legs up, exposing the belly: Although this can be a sign of a relaxed dog, in a stressful situation, it is the dog's way of showing it wants to make peace with whomever it is considering a threat. The dog will be very still, as if frozen.
- Stiffening, staring: Your dog is already very upset at this point. The freeze and stare are hard to miss as a sign that the dog will behave this way until the threat passes. If the threat doesn't pass – it can escalate to the red zone in seconds.

It is essential to move your dog away from the source of stress and allow it time to calm down.

RED ZONE SIGNS

- Growling: Growling is a common and clear warning sign that your dog considers it is in a threatening situation. Do not punish it for growling, as this will increase their stress. It may also learn that growling is not allowed and will automatically go straight to biting.
- Snapping: Your dog may snap without making contact. This is a serious warning sign that the dog is feeling threatened and it is crucial to move your dog immediately.
- Biting: Biting is your dog's last resort to communicate its need for space. It will never come out of the blue but will only happen if it feels exceptionally insecure and cornered. This is a severe form of aggression and may cause injury.

dog may exhibit. Consider a ladder where each rung represents a different level, starting with relaxed behaviours at the bottom rung, going up to mild signs of aggression followed by extreme levels at the higher rungs.

It typically includes the following stages. See diagram below to follow.

Understanding the dog ladder of aggression can help owners and caregivers recognise the early signs and take steps to avoid any escalation.

Of course, not all dogs follow these steps exactly, but they will show signs depending on their temperament and previous experiences.

We can help them by making them feel safe, removing any triggers and training them safely and kindly.



What does a relaxed, friendly dog look like? A happy, relaxed dog will have these types of expressions:

gently wagging tail or even broad strokes with a wiggly bum; a loose, relaxed body posture, either lying down or in a relaxed sitting position;

their eyes may be partially closed - not wide and staring; ears will be in a natural position, not tucked or stiffly raised.



What does a stressed or worried dog look like? A stressed or worried dog may:

- have a rigid, tense body, ears up and eves alert:
- maybe panting and licking their lips even when it is not hot or
- Be hyper alert constantly looking around them;
- tail may be lifted high.



The **canine** LADDER of AGGRESSION Dogs communicate their discomfort with a situation and a desire to end an interaction by using visual cues. These are depicted on this ladder GROWLS of aggression. Recognizing the lower-rung gestures is important so a perceived stress or threat to can be removed soon LIES DOWN, LEG UP STANDS CROUCHED, TUCKS TAIL UNDER CREEPS, EARS BACK WALKS AWAY TURNS BODY AWAY, SITS, PAWS TURNS HEAD AWAY BLINKS, YAWNS, LICKS NOSE Source: Shepherd K. Ladder of aggression. In: Horwitz D, Mills DS. *BSAVA Manual* of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd ed. 2009.

What does a fearful dog look

- **like?** A fearful dog may have their: body lowered to the ground, cowering;
- ears back or to the side;
- brow furrowed;
- They will also attempt to move away, usually slowly, or they may be aggressive. If your dog is acting in any of these ways, it is important to carefully remove them from the current situation.

Research has shown dogs have the average intelligence as a 3-4 year old human does.

As a non-profit charity, Animals Fiji depends on the kindness of donations to continue its work of supporting animals across Fiji. To learn more about Animals Fiji and how you can help, contact their Savusavu Clinic at (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic at (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

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