



Opinion



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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.

WHAT IS THE 'DOG'S LADDER OF AGGRESSION'?

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 glance.
- **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 eyes alert;
 - maybe panting and licking their lips even when it is not hot or thirsty;
 - Be hyper alert - constantly looking around them;
 - tail may be lifted high.

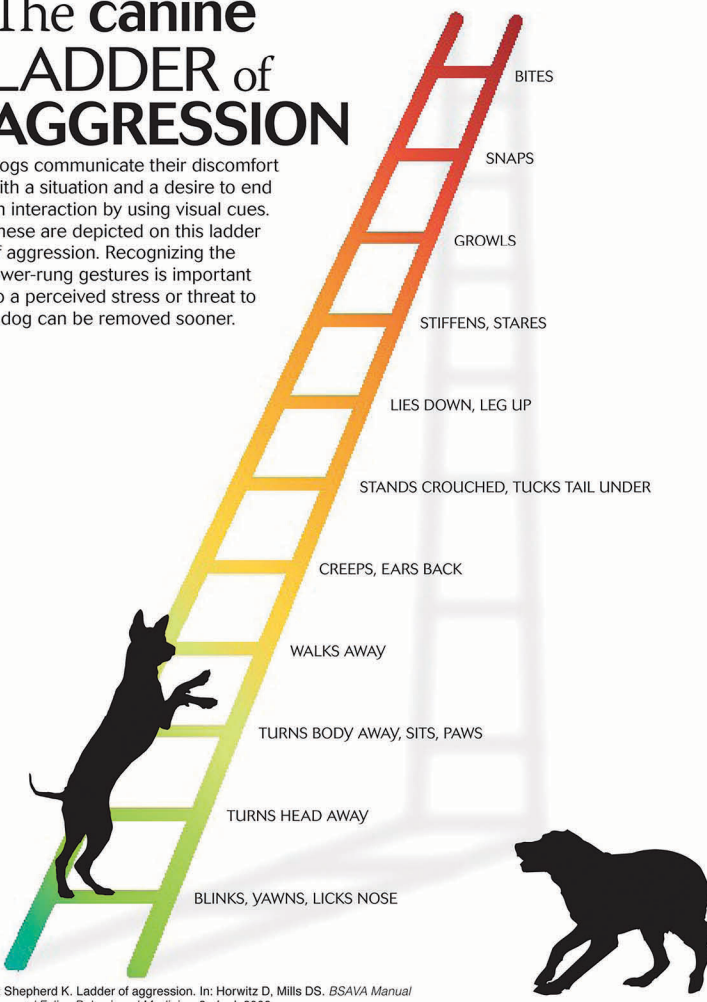


What does a fearful dog look like?

- 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.

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 of aggression. Recognizing the lower-rung gestures is important so a perceived stress or threat to a dog can be removed sooner.



Source: Shepherd K. Ladder of aggression. In: Horwitz D, Mills DS. BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd ed. 2009.

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

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