



Body Language

Dogs can be wonderfully expressive, using their whole bodies to show each other, and us, how they are feeling.

Learning how your dog communicates means you'll be able to understand when they're feeling confident and relaxed, as well as times when they might be feeling worried or frightened. Being able to recognise how your dog is feeling will help you to respond appropriately, and keep you, your dog, and others safe. You'll also be able to avoid putting your dog in situations they find challenging which will safeguard their welfare.

Responding appropriately is important because dogs tend to repeat what works out well for them. So, if a dog learns that politely turning their head and blinking works to communicate that they're unsure and need space, then they're more likely to do this next time. However, if these subtle signs are missed and a dog learns that lunging and growling are successful in communicating that they need space, they're likely to repeat these behaviours next time.

When looking at body language, it's important to consider the individual dog, the whole body, and the context or situation in which the behaviour is occurring.

If you're concerned about your dog's behaviour, then speak to your vet to rule out any medical problems that may be influencing their behaviour and ask about a referral to an accredited behaviourist. For advice on sourcing a behaviourist visit: dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support



The individual

Dogs are an incredibly diverse species in terms of the sheer number of breeds that exist, as well as crossbreeds too! But sometimes the way a dog looks can have an impact on their ability to communicate.

Some dogs are very fluffy or have dark coats. It might be more difficult to detect small movements in their faces or body muscles compared to dogs with short, pale fur. Some dogs have very wrinkled skin, so they might not be able to move their faces and bodies in the same way as others.

Some dogs might have tightly curled tails, while others don't have tails at all! Some ears sit up high on the head, so any movements are easily observed. Whereas others might have ears that heavily flop down low to the ground, so movement is not as obvious.

The whole body

Although dogs can move many parts of their body in different ways, it's important to look at the whole body to learn as much information as we can before trying to interpret how a dog might be feeling.

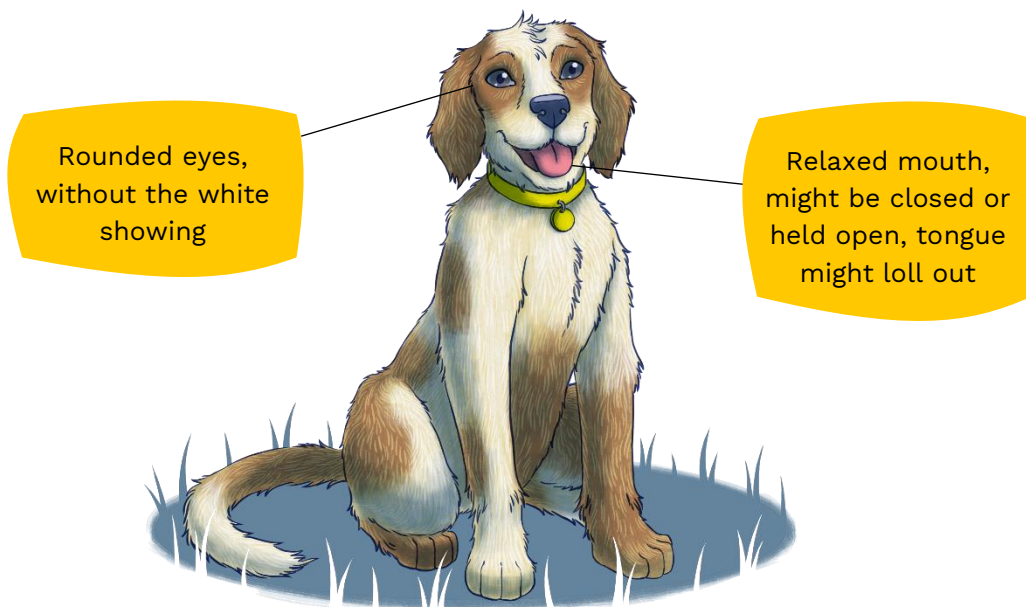
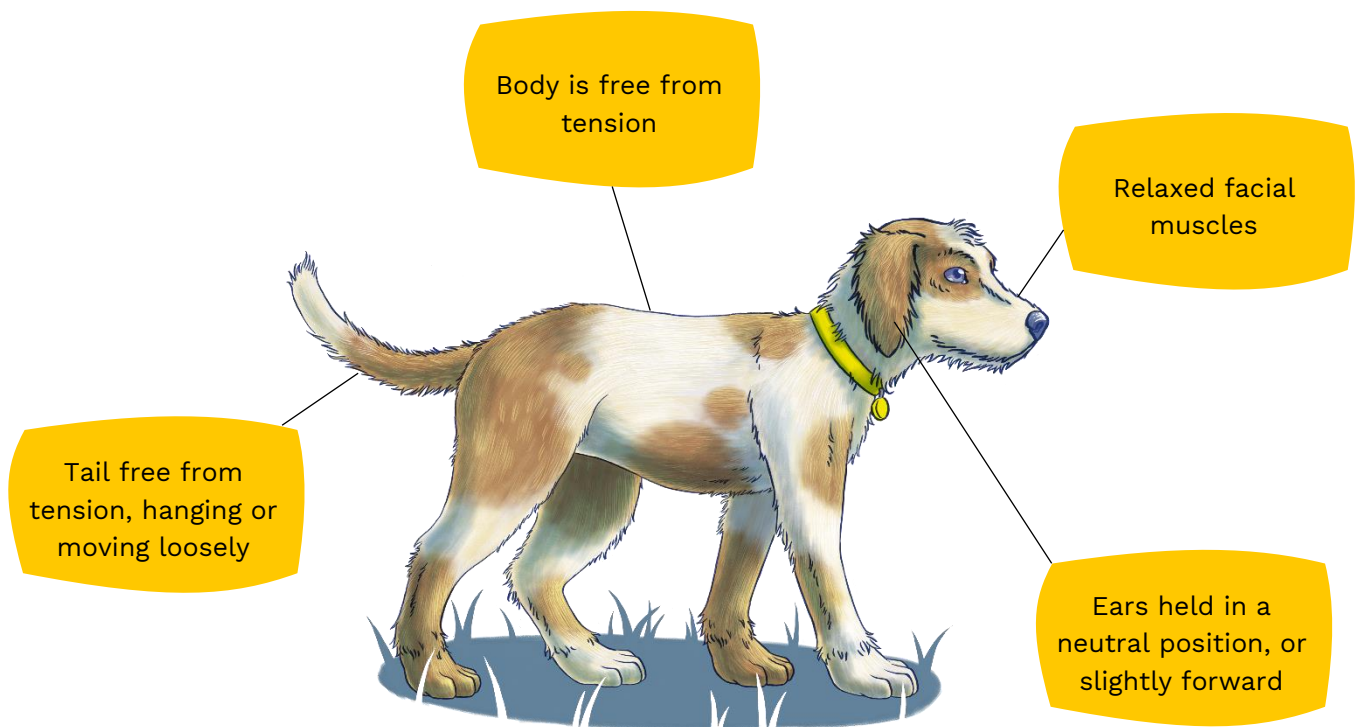
The context

Behaviours can have different meanings, depending on the situation in which the dog shows them.

For example, a dog might drool and lick their lips in anticipation as their dinner is being prepared - this is a normal bodily response in relation to expecting food. However, if a dog begins drooling and licking their lips when they've been lifted into the car, this might show they are worried about the car journey.

It's always important to consider the circumstances and situation in which a dog is behaving, in order to understand what they're trying to tell us.

Signs a dog is **relaxed**



Dogs that are calm, confident, and relaxed should be interested in what's happening around them and responsive to their owners, but also able to settle.

Signs a dog is **feeling anxious**

If dogs are worried about something within their immediate surroundings, they may behave in ways that communicates to us or other dogs that they need more space between themselves and whatever it is they're unsure about. They may feel unsure about a dog or person nearby and communicate to them that they need space. They may feel unsure about an object and communicate this to a person present – seeking help or reassurance from them.

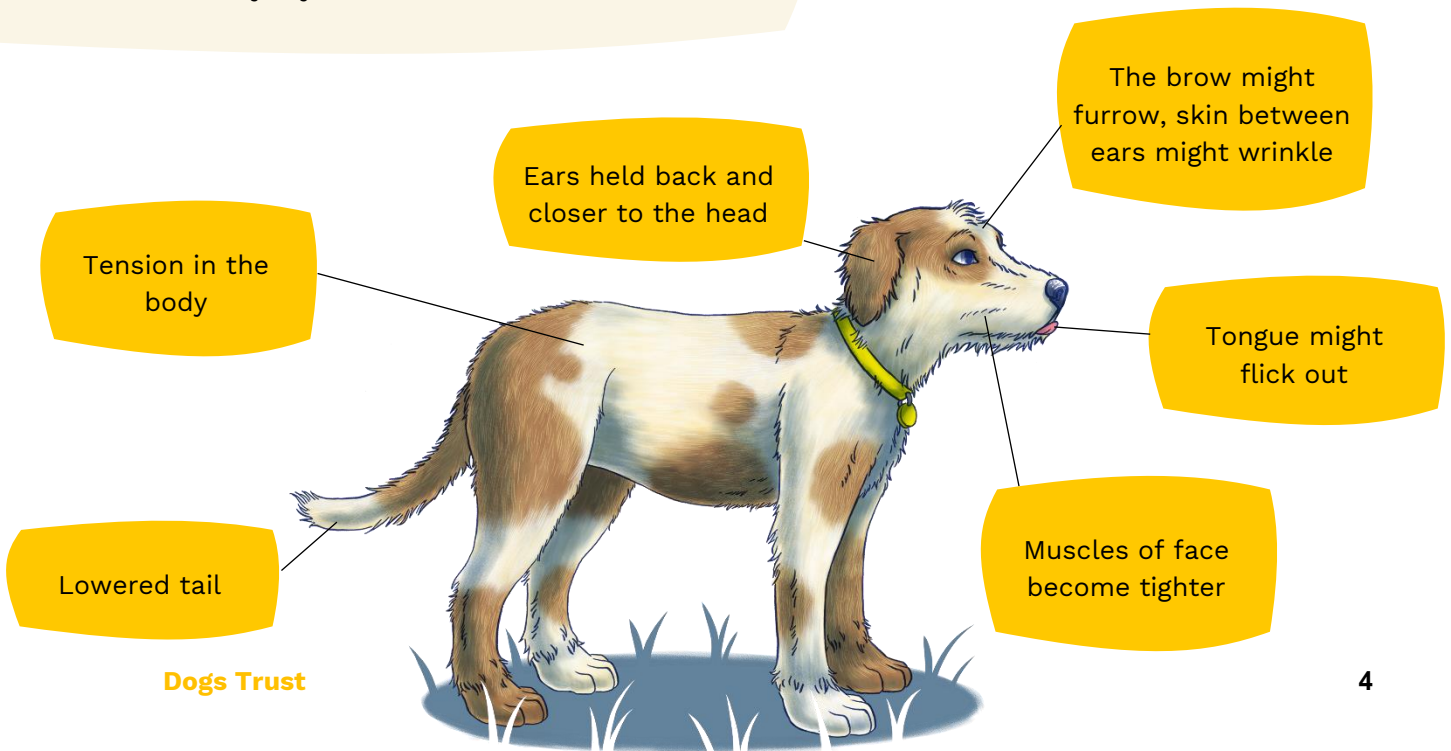
Recognising these first signs of fear or anxiety will allow you to manage potential situations of conflict and help your dog avoid the things that worry them. This will help prevent the development of more established fears and the risk of aggression, keeping everyone in the family, including your dog, feeling safe.

So, if you see any of these signs, you need to stop what you're doing and think what might be causing your dog to behave in this way, and how you can help your dog to feel better.

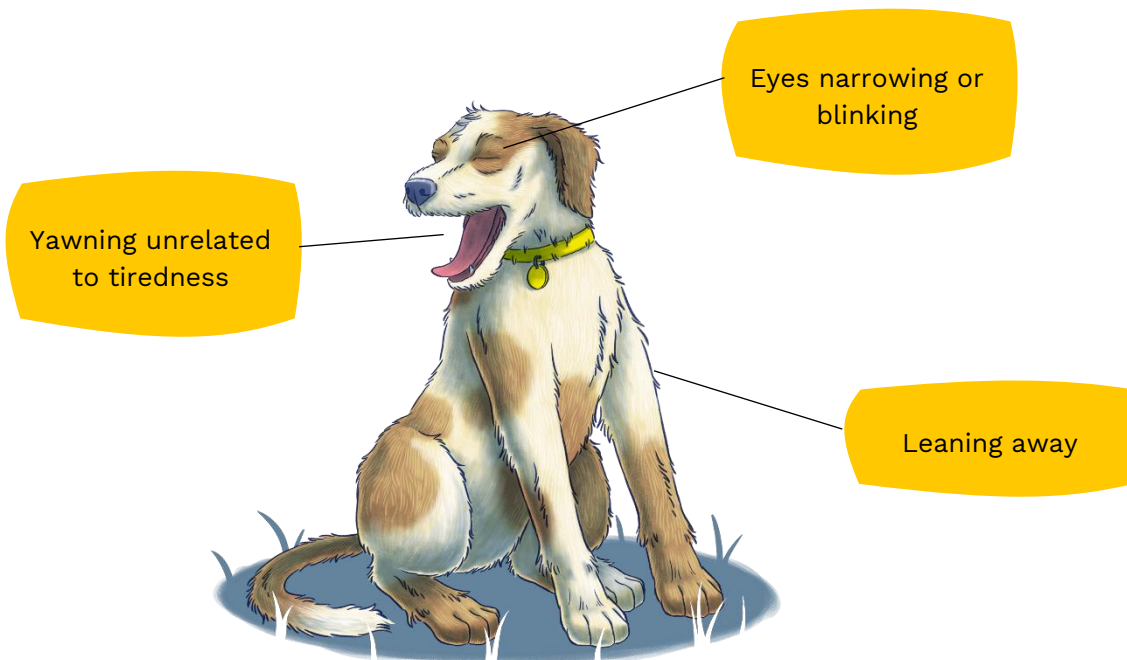
This might mean calmly moving or turning your dog away from someone approaching or something worrying in the distance, ending your interaction with them, or leaving your dog alone.

Many of these body language signals are subtle and often happen very quickly so we can easily miss them! It pays to be observant, so if you're keen to learn more about your own dog's personal communication style, then you could ask a friend to film you and your dog, so you can play it back and look again.

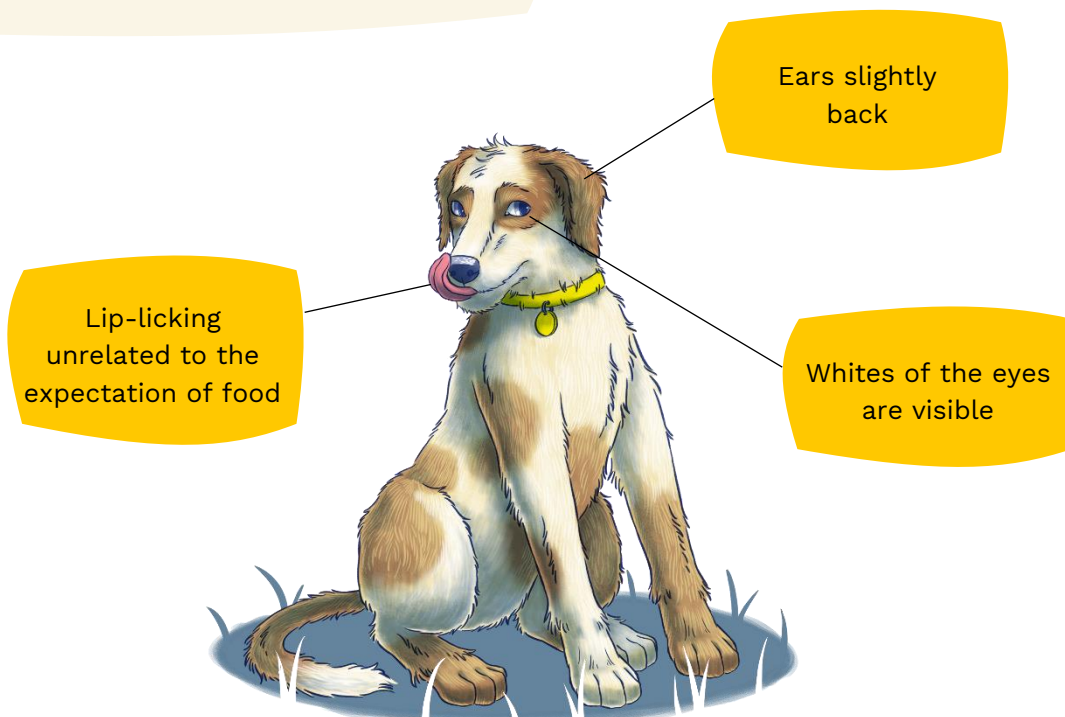
As dogs become unsure about something, they tend to slow down as they try to learn more about it.



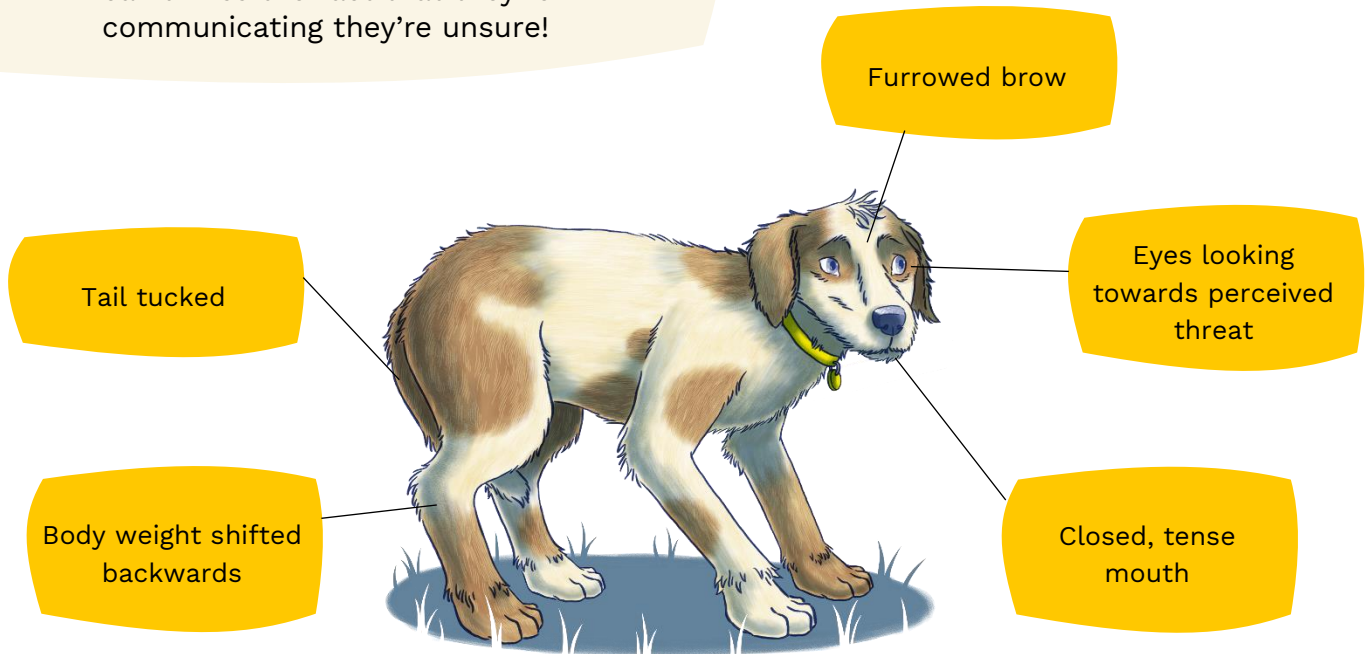
Dogs can find making direct eye contact intimidating, so you might see your dog turning their head away from whatever is troubling them.



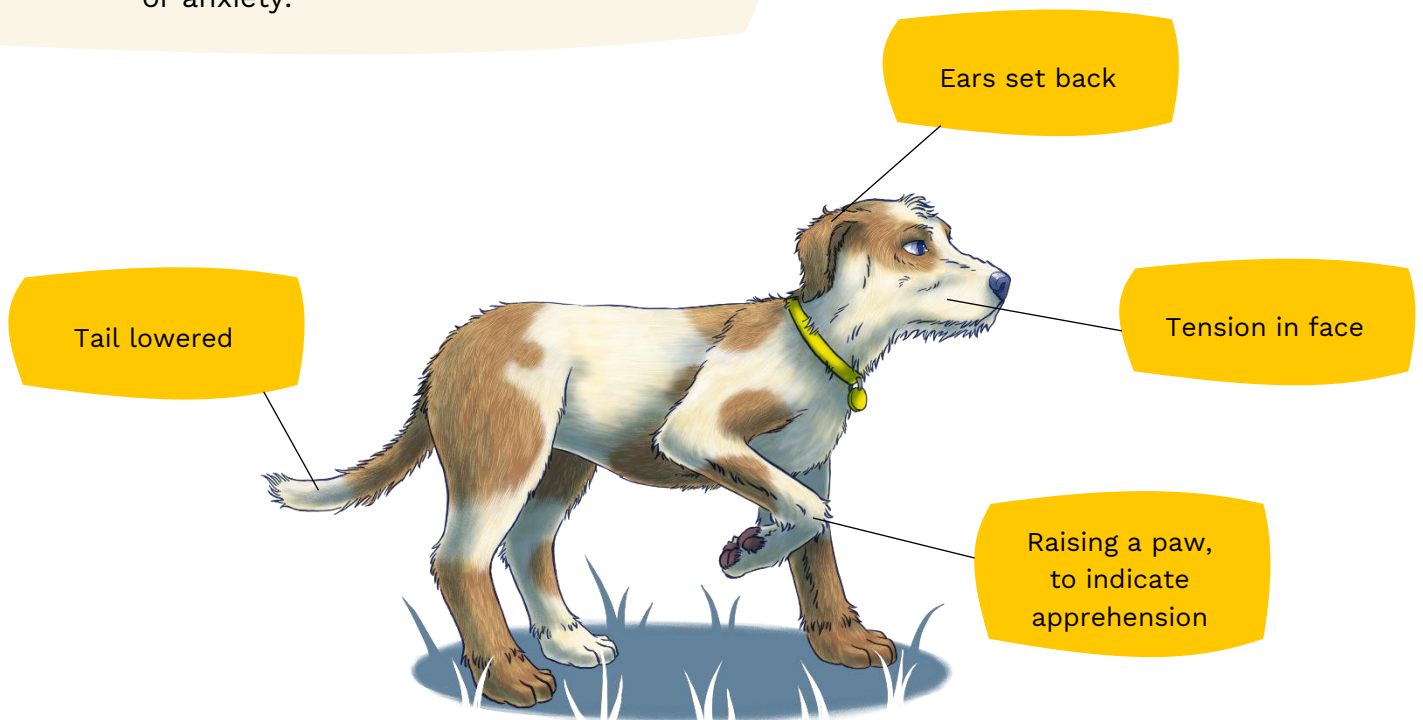
As they become increasingly anxious, you might see a dog start to stare – too worried to look away.



Some dogs may cower and tuck their tail under to make themselves look as small and insignificant as possible. Others might hold their tail straight upright so that other dogs (and people) can't miss the fact that they're communicating they're unsure!



Dogs might stop and look towards something that is causing them fear or anxiety.



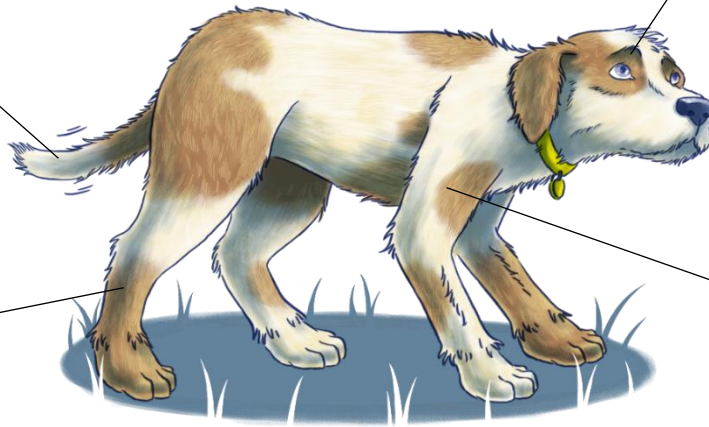
A dog might want to approach a person, animal, or object to interact or investigate, but show signs they are feeling worried at the same time. A dog might approach and then retreat because they feel conflicted.

Low tail, wagging fairly quickly

Head low, but eyes on the person/animal/object

Weight on back paws, ready to move away

Lowered body posture



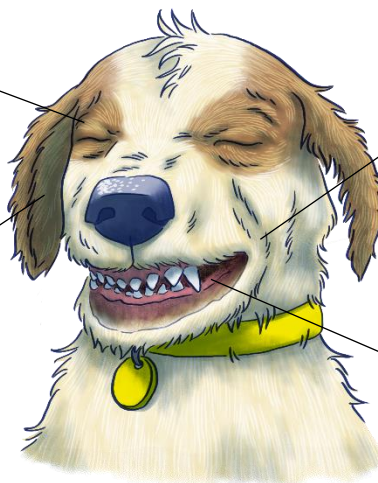
A dog might show an 'appeasement grin', also referred to as a 'submissive grin' or 'smile'. This is different to an aggressive display of teeth, as dogs may initially show this behaviour when they are trying to diffuse social conflict.

Eyes are squinted/shut tightly

Edges of mouth pulled back and up at sides

Ears set back

Teeth exposed in a 'smile' shape



What else might you see?

- You might see your dog give a full-body shake. Think about what was happening just before they did this, as it's likely that it was an experience they found challenging and are now 'shaking it off'!
- Some dogs will start to pant – completely unrelated to temperature or exercise – and might pace or be unable to stay still or settle down. They might be very easily startled or jumpy.
- Unsure dogs might also appear to tremble or shiver when they're not cold.
- Your dog might become suddenly very active and seek attention from you by jumping up, pawing at you, or even mouthing or mounting when they wouldn't normally.
- They might find it difficult to follow well-known requests, like "sit", because the stress response in their body makes it harder to stay still or concentrate.
- You might find your dog grabs a treat from your hand, when they would usually take it gently!
- Some dogs won't take any treats at all when they're becoming increasingly worried.
- Your dog might move away or actively try to avoid whatever is worrying them. Bear in mind that in some situations it might be you they are worried about, or someone you are with, such as a veterinary surgeon.
- Some dogs will try to hide or withdraw from a situation. Others might bolt when frightened, which can be highly dangerous.
- When dogs try to find a way to cope with situations they are finding challenging, they might perform behaviours which are usually seen under other, more appropriate, circumstances. For example, a dog might suddenly stop, sit down, and start scratching with intensity when something in their surroundings is worrying them. Other activities you might see include sniffing about and licking themselves repeatedly.

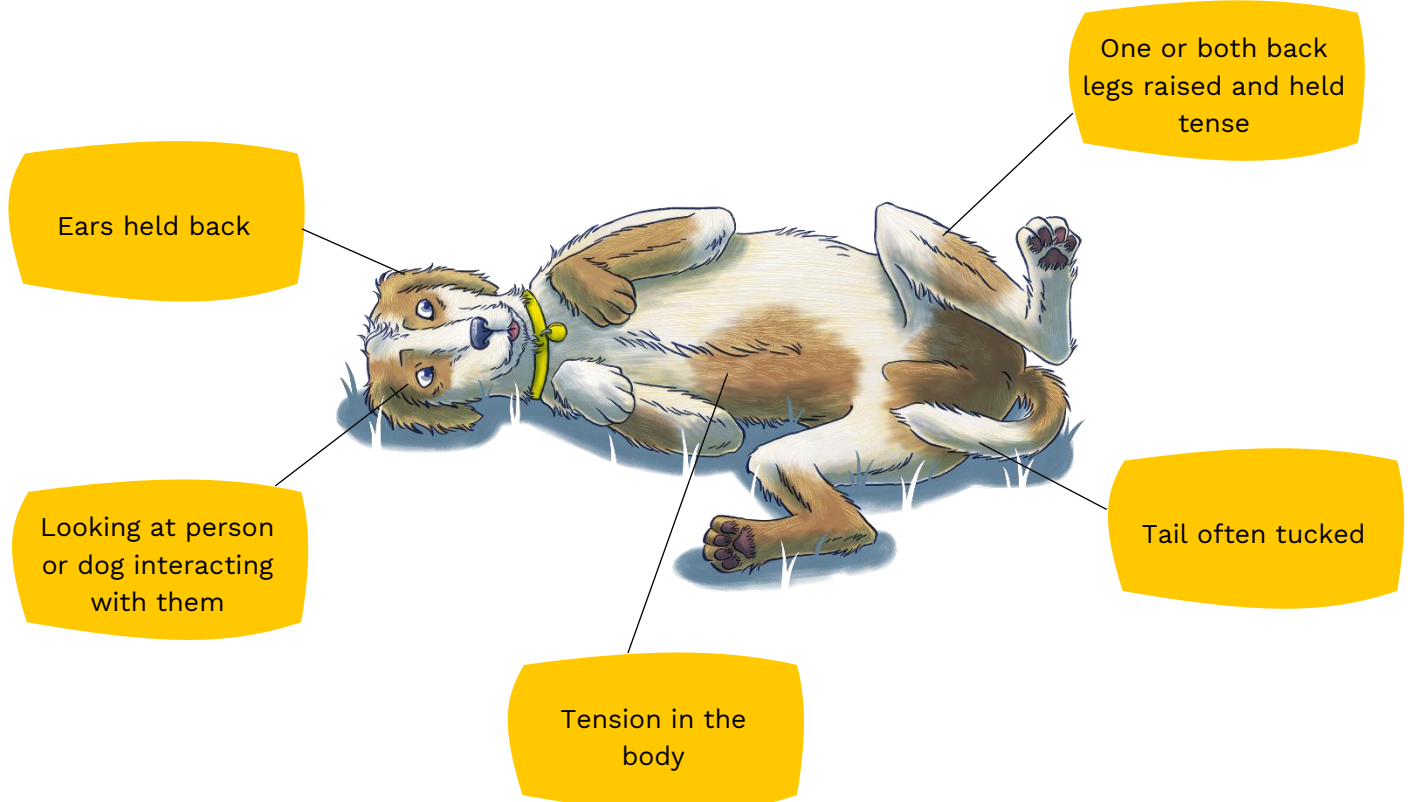


Signs a dog **needs space immediately**

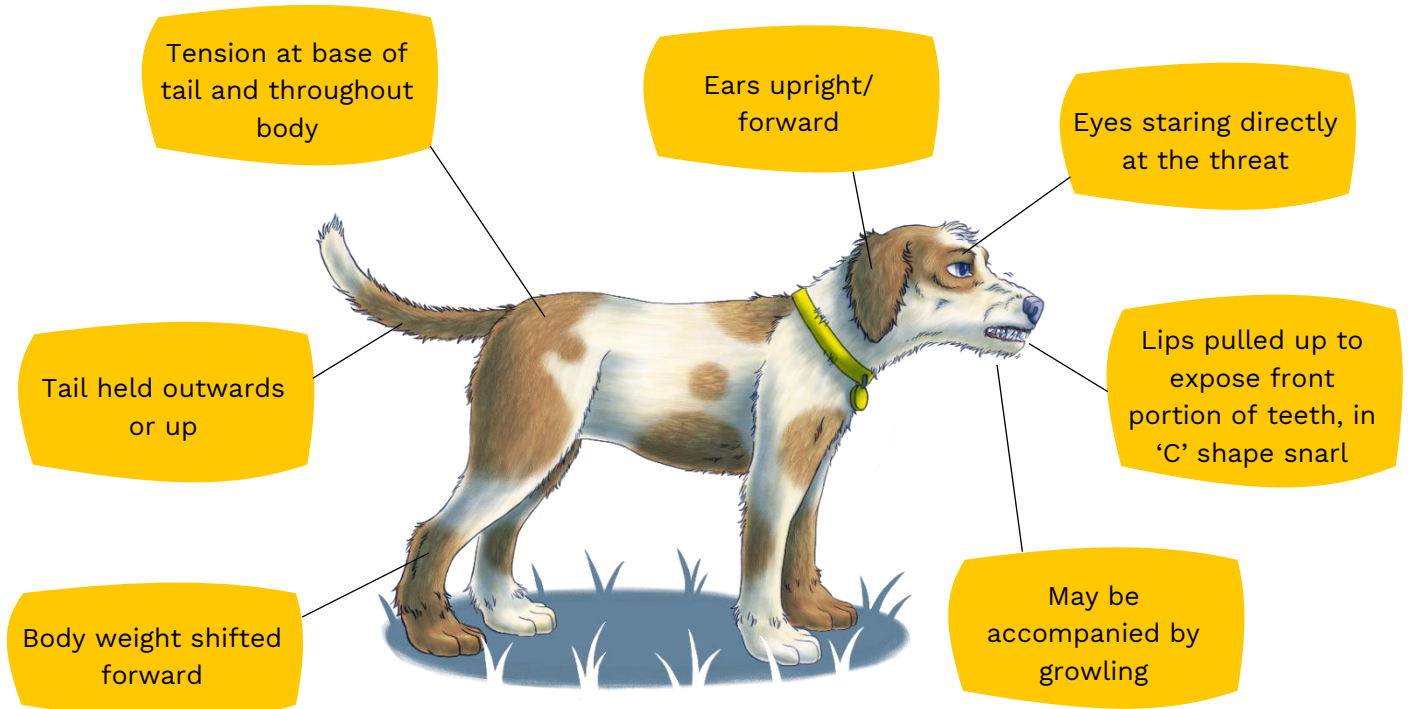
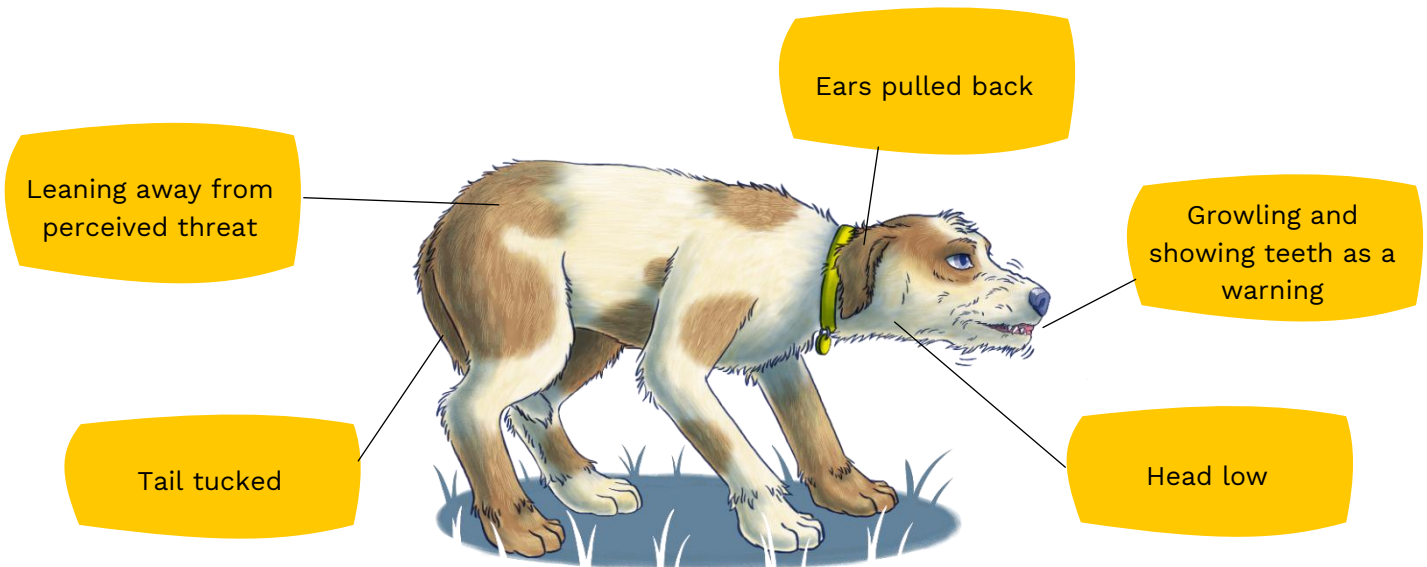
As dogs become increasingly worried and frightened by something, their behaviour might become less subtle and more obvious to us.

If your dog shows any of these signs, then stop what you're doing immediately or make sure that whatever or whoever your dog is feeling threatened by is removed as far from them as possible so that they can relax again. Be mindful that this might take a while if they're still very worried.

A dog might show an 'appeasement roll', also referred to as a 'submissive roll'. The dog rolls onto their side or back to show that they pose no threat. This is very different to a dog rolling over to have their tummy tickled. The dog could escalate to showing more defensive behaviours (e.g. growling or snapping) if the person or animal continues to approach or interact with them in this context.



When a dog is feeling very threatened by something, they might lunge forwards and even growl, bark, and snap at whatever it is. Dogs do this in an attempt to increase the distance between themselves and the thing that is frightening them.



A dog might freeze or move very slowly. They may 'air-snap' as a warning, or bite.

Why might dogs display aggression?

Dogs are naturally very social and co-operative. When dogs show aggression it's usually a clear sign that they're frightened and feel that they, or something they value, is under direct threat. Aggression is one of a dog's normal behavioural options, and the behaviour is aimed at increasing the distance between themselves and whatever is worrying them. If the behaviour is successful, they are likely to repeat it again next time they're in a similar situation.

The more practise we can put into recognising the subtle, initial signs that a dog is feeling uncomfortable or afraid, the sooner we can respond appropriately and avoid the situations or interactions that are worrying them. This will help them to feel safer and will reduce the likelihood of them needing to communicate in such risky ways as lunging, baring teeth, snarling, growling, snapping, or biting.

The more we can show our dogs that we understand and respect how they are feeling, and that we will manage the situation on their behalf in order to keep them feeling safe and secure, then the less likely they are to feel uncertainty or fear. And the more they can trust us to help them out!

We must neither discourage nor ignore any signs that a dog is becoming more uncomfortable in any situation. This might teach a dog that there is no point in them growling or showing their teeth, for example, because it doesn't work! So next time they might feel they have no other option than to bite straight away.

If your dog shows any signs of aggression, it's important to avoid as much as possible any triggers for the behaviour. This might mean keeping your dog completely away from whatever appears to be making them feel uncomfortable, and seeking help as soon as possible. Speak to your vet to check your dog is in good health, then ask for a referral to an accredited behaviourist for individual support.

Health status

Pain and medical disorders can significantly affect behaviour. If your dog shows signs of being fearful, which can manifest as aggression, contact your vet to check there are no underlying health problems that might be contributing to their behaviour.



Signs a dog is **feeling frustrated**

It's also important to look out for signs of frustration.

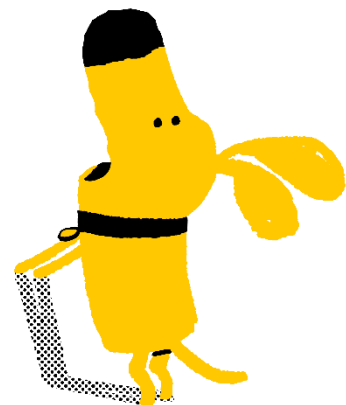
Frustration can occur when a dog is unable to access something they desire, when they're unable to move away from a situation or interaction they find uncomfortable, or when their expectations are not met.

Common frustration-related behaviours include:

- Jumping up
- Barking
- Mouthing at a person, another dog, or an object
- Pawing at a person, another dog, or object.

Being able to recognise when your dog is feeling frustrated means you'll be able to respond appropriately, manage the environment for them, and avoid triggers for the behaviour. This will help them to feel more relaxed.

If you're concerned about your dog's behaviour, then speak to your vet about a referral to an accredited behaviourist. For advice on sourcing a behaviourist visit: dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support



Contacts for **further support**

We provide lifelong telephone-based behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your Dogs Trust dog please email:

postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk

Your nearest Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via:

dogstrustdogschoool.org.uk

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.