

HUMAN BODY LANGUAGE AND DOG BODY LANGUAGE:

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES:

© SUE STERNBERG

We think we KNOW what is sociable, but do we really? Luckily, humans and dogs share the same basic friendly and aggressive behaviors. While we walk upright, have no tails, and generally can't move our ears, we are otherwise the same. Breaking down all the things we know 'in our gut' into definable, describable pieces is very important. For instance, we certainly can recognize a genuine human smile when we see one, but if you had to break down each facial feature and what happens to it when we smile, it becomes a more difficult task. It's not only important to our understanding of dog behavior, but so that when we describe the behavior of a dog, it is no longer just 'our feeling' about the dog, but instead a behavioral description of exactly what the dog was doing.

Instead of, 'Oh, that dog Barney gave me a funny look the other day, I don't know, he just scares me' (and then your co-worker says, "Barney???? Barney?? Barney's wonderful, what are you talking about, you just hate pit bulls"...or, "you're just afraid of shepherds") the statement would be, "The other day Barney was facing me frontally, his tail high up over his back, carried stiffly, he was making direct eye contact--his pupils were dilated and he hard-stared me for more than two seconds, etc. He was actively threatening me. I didn't feel safe or comfortable handling him."

We are born with the ability to read other animals threats and social gestures. We're animals before we're intellectual, verbal, emotional people. That's the good news. The bad news is that, especially in the shelter and rescue world, those animal instincts get eroded away by our fears of what our observations might mean for the dog in the larger context.

BEHAVIORAL DESCRIPTIONS--HUMAN VS DOG:

Human smile: forehead relaxes, eyes squint, blinking is frequent, eye contact with other person lasts less than two seconds (or is interrupted by blinking) lips curly-cued at edges; sometimes teeth exposed, when smiling, head is slightly off-centered from direct, upright, frontal body orientation, chin is level or lower than level.

Dog smile: forehead relaxes, eyes squint, blinking is frequent, eye contact with person lasts less than two seconds (or is interrupted by blinking, lips sometimes curly-cued at edges; sometimes teeth exposed; head is slightly off-centered from direct frontal orientation, chin is level or lower than level;

Friendly human-human approach/greeting: Pathway that human takes towards other human is bent, indirect; human's spine is relaxed and posture slightly slouchy; spine, head, eyes are not in full alignment--head is either off-set from eyes when making eye contact, or head and spine are off-set during approach, etc; eye contact is fleeting/glancing, eye contact lasts less than two seconds; when two humans reach each other, comfortable space between them is respected--air space is shared.

Friendly dog-to-human approach/greeting: Pathway that dog takes towards human is bent, indirect; dog's spine is relaxed, dog may form a crescent shape on approach; spine, head, eyes are not in full alignment--head is either off-set from eyes when dog makes eye contact with human, or head and spine are off-set during approach, etc. eye contact is fleeting/glancing; eye contact lasts less than two seconds; dog squints eyes, frequent blinking, ears go back when eyes squint; when human and dog reach each other, air-space is shared, dog lowers tail when engaging with human as opposed to during normal arousal or environmental exploration (exception being if tail starts out tucked)

Threatening/aggressive human-human approach/greeting: Pathways direct, straight line frontal approach; spines straight; head and eyes facing other human; eyes open and eye contact is maintained without blinking for two seconds or longer; chins up, neck exposed; air-space is intrusive.

Threatening/aggressive dog-human approach/greeting: Dog takes direct, front pathway towards human; dog's spine is straight, head and nose aligned with spine; head and eyes aligned when dog makes eye contact with human; eyes are open and very infrequent blinking; pupils reflective; dog's chin is up, neck exposed when making eye contact; dog makes intrusive physical contact; dog's tail remains at same level as in normal arousal or environmental exploration or raises higher during contact (exception being if tail starts out tucked).