Dog behaviour and handling

Learning Outcomes:

1. Outline what the negative welfare states of dogs are
2. Explain the BSAVA ladder of aggression and how it can be used to ensure safe handling
3. Describe how to approach and handle a dog

A dog that is happy and experiencing good welfare is usually obvious. Positive welfare experiences include joy, interest and contentment. The dog will have a relaxed wagging tail, show interest in its surroundings, engage in play activities with other dogs or people and will usually have a relaxed body and facial expression. Whereas a dog who is experiencing poor welfare may exhibit fear, anxiety, stress or pain. These feelings are considered negative welfare states and throughout the CNR process we must strive to minimise the dog experiencing these as best we can. We say minimise because it is very difficult if not impossible to run a CNR programme without the dog experiencing some fear or anxiety, as being transported and housed in a kennel environment is known to stress dogs, and surgery is always painful to some extent.

All staff working in CNR programmes must know how to recognise and understand dog behaviour to ensure staff safety when working with dogs. In doing so it is then possible to assess whether the dog is experiencing good or bad welfare states, and if we know what we are looking for, we can then make efforts to improve the situation for the dog if required. Be kind and calm when approaching and handling dogs. Dogs are not naturally aggressive or wanting to bite, if a dog bites, it is nearly always because it is very scared. Actions speak louder than words, so when working in a CNR programme we can promote good dog welfare within the community by setting an example to the public on how to approach, handle and care for dogs, and by treating them with compassion and care.

Canine social structure

Unlike many social groups of animals, there is no dominance or linear hierarchy for dogs (social structure with clear ranking where each animal in the group is dominant over those below it and submissive to those above it). There is no ‘alpha’, or ‘top dog’, nobody is constantly fighting for supremacy, and nobody is trying to overthrow the leader through aggression or dominance. Instead, each dog will prioritise resources differently depending on their own personal preferences and individual motivations. For example, an individual may see food as the most important resource worth guarding, protecting and even fighting for. Or in some cases, the resource could be a human where the dog sees his owner or guardian as the most important resource instead of the food in the bowl. It used to be believed that humans had to dominate dogs in order to get the dogs to behave but this is not correct and can encourage fear of humans which can soon escalate to aggression.

Dogs live in small family groups, usually mum and pups and they will often stay together until the pups are over a year old. Dogs don’t mate or pair up for life and, like 97% of mammals, there is no cooperative raising of pups, instead the mother raises the offspring on her own. Aggression is rare but females are more aggressive after giving birth. Fighting is risky and expensive for dogs. There is the risk of being injured and it uses up potentially unnecessary energy. Dogs are very sociable and

equipped with a huge array of body language postures to avoid conflict. If a dog does get into a fight it is usually to protect itself from an actual or perceived threat, to protect its puppies or to guard a resource that is important to it.

There may also be relatively transient, short-lived groups of unrelated individuals around a food source (human rubbish or food provided by carers), which is common and normal. Free roaming dogs do not hunt together for food but forage or scavenge independently, usually from the leftovers of human food, around bins or garbage dumps, or food that has been specifically left out for them by carers. You will not find domesticated, free roaming dogs living independently of humans. Where there are dogs, there will be humans.

A free roaming dog scavenging for food in human rubbish

Most dogs enjoy the company of other dogs and will engage in play behaviour if their welfare is good physically, mentally, and environmentally. Young dogs especially enjoy playing (chasing, play fighting/wrestling, tugging games) and will seek out this behaviour when they are together. Dogs will also happily play with humans they know and trust.

Natural canine behaviour and senses

It is important to fully understand why dogs behave in the way they do, and this can be as a result of historical influences originating from the origin of the canine species and these instincts continue to shape and influence dog behaviour today.

Dogs are omnivores and able to eat and remain healthy with both animal and plant foodstuffs. But the term "opportunivore" may best describe the dog's natural desire to eat whatever is available; from human food scraps to vegetables to dead animals. Scavenging for food takes a large portion of a dog's day when free roaming and the act of finding the food, and not just eating it, is rewarding for the dog. It is unusual to see obese free roaming dogs but obesity in pet dogs is common as owners tend to overfeed and the pet dog's lifestyle is far more sedentary.

Dogs are clean animals and, like humans, do not like to toilet where they eat and sleep. Both male and female dogs will urinate to mark their territory although the behaviour is more common in unneutered male dogs, or females in season. Given the choice, most dogs seem to prefer a little distance between themselves and their owner or other dogs when they toilet and bitches usually choose a grass, sand or soil substrate over a concrete one when urinating. During the day, adult pet dogs should be given the opportunity to go out and toilet every 4-6 hours and young puppies much more frequently than this.

The dog's sense of smell is their primary sense and they gain more information using their noses than using any other sense. The area of the canine brain that is devoted to analysing scent is 40 times greater than that of the human and dogs can identify smells at least 1,000 times better than humans can. When a dog sniffs a human it is able to gather information from our scent such as; if we are familiar or a stranger to them, where we've been, what other people or animals we've met and

even what are hormone level is. A dog may recognise the shape of another dog by visual means, but a lot more information can be gathered by sniffing them up close.

A dog's sense of hearing is second only to his sense of smell in terms of superior ability and is 4 times greater than a human's. Dogs are able to hear a wider range of frequencies than humans, the anatomy of the middle and inner ear of a dog and human are very similar. The real key to better hearing in dogs is the numerous muscles that control a dog's pinna, or ear flap. These muscles allow a dog to finely tune the position of his ear canal to localise a sound, hear it more accurately, and from farther away. For this reason, dogs with upright ears, tend to have superior hearing to dogs with floppy ears, such as hounds. Loud noises that are tolerated by humans may be frightening or even uncomfortable to dogs and this should be considered when they are in the clinic. Ear pinna not only play a huge role in hearing, but also in body language and communication and should never, ever be cut off for cosmetic reasons.

Whilst a dog's sense of smell and hearing are superior to a human's, its vision is not. Dogs have 2 types of colour photoreceptors while a human has 3. As a result, dogs probably perceive the world in different saturations of yellow or bluish grey.

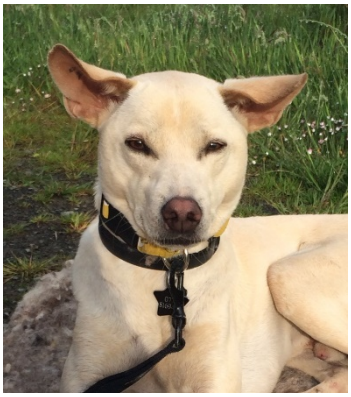
Dogs communicate using body language and behaviour

Dogs cannot talk – that is a fact. But with a bit of observation and training, it can be very clear what a dog is trying to 'say' by looking at its facial expressions, and body postures. Ears, eyes, lips, head height, tail carriage and how much space they put between themselves and us (or another dog) are all used to communicate. Once we know how to interpret all of these different signs and behaviours, we can understand how a dog is feeling. And how a dog is feeling will influence how we approach and handle it.

Starting with facial features and facial tension of the dog:

1. Eyes

Dogs should have soft, tension free eyes when they are feeling relaxed. A happy dog will give you eye contact and it will appear more like a gaze than a stare.



If the whites of the eyes are showing (known as whale eye), this can be a sign of anxiety. Tension around the eyes (orbital tightening) can be a sign of anxiety, fear or pain. Looking away (gaze averting) can be a sign of anxiety. Giving brief/flicking looks can also be signs of anxiety or fear. Staring continuously (rather than gazing) is often hostile behaviour and the dog may be about to growl, snap or bite; often because it feels threatened.

2. Mouth

The mouth and lips of a relaxed dog will be soft and relaxed. The tongue will stay in the mouth (unless it is hot and panting).

An anxious or fearful dog will have a tight and tense mouth. Yawning or licking its nose or lips (outside the context of being tired or removing food from the face) are 'displacement behaviours' (normal behaviours done at abnormal times) and may indicate anxiety or conflict.

Lip curling, showing the teeth and producing wrinkles on the muzzle is hostile behaviour and is often accompanied with a growl. The dog may be about to snap or bite often because it feels threatened. Some dogs do 'smile' and it can look similar to a growl, but a smiling dog will usually have relaxed eyes and a growling dog will usually have staring eyes.

3. Ears

The ears of a relaxed dog should sit in their normal position for that breed. Dogs that are interested or aroused by something will point their ears forward if they are able to. A dog that is feeling anxious or fearful will often have its ears out to the side, pulled back or flat on its head.

Body position and tension:

1. Body and head

The body posture of a relaxed dog will look soft and move freely. The head will be held at a normal height for that breed.

Anxious and fearful dogs often look tense and rigid and the dog may crouch or cower. They may move awkwardly and slowly, and the head is often lowered. A very stiff posture, staring eyes, and head pointing forward may mean the dog is about to growl, snap or bite.

2. Tail

A relaxed dog will hold its tail in its normal tail position for its breed. Different breeds have very different tail positions, e.g. a German Shepherd's tail carriage is naturally low, but an Akita's is naturally high and curls over its back. If this normal tail carriage is accompanied with a sweeping wag from the hips or a helicopter tail, it is usually safe to assume that the dog is happy.

A tail that is held up very stiff and high, and often accompanied by a fast and rigid wag, can mean the dog is excited or aroused by something that may be positive or negative.

A tail being carried lower than normal or tucked in-between the legs or clamped to the side of the body can be a sign that the dog is feeling anxious.

Relaxed, free roaming dogs playing together. Note the tail position

3. Position in kennel or proximity to person or another dog

A dog that is feeling relaxed will often be at the front of the cage showing interest in its surroundings and looking for attention. A relaxed dog will be comfortable approaching a person/another dog or being approached and will not back away. It will often close the distance between itself and the person or dog.

A relaxed dog showing interest and looking for attention

Canine ladder of aggression

Being able to recognise negative welfare states such as fear and anxiety is very important when working with dogs. Dogs will rarely bite without giving prior warning signs, but we need to be able to identify those warnings in order to ensure staff safety in a CNR programme. Most dog bites are driven by fear, and so if we can reduce a dog's fear of humans the dog is less likely to behave aggressively.

The consensus among animal behaviour professionals is that the major cause of dog bites to humans is related to the failure of owners and dog bite victims to recognise when dogs are fearful and a lack of knowledge on how to approach and greet dogs appropriately. (Dr Sophia Yin website)

British behaviourist Kendal Shepherd created the ladder of aggression, also called the 'ladder to aggression' (as the early behaviours on the ladder are not aggressive ones) or the 'stress escalation ladder' (which more accurately describes how the dog is feeling, rather than negatively labelling behaviour as aggressive). The ladder includes fear and anxiety behaviours that dogs may show before they feel they must resort to an aggressive bite to get away from the situation.

1. The first behaviours we see that indicate that a dog is feeling low level anxiety include yawning when the dog is not tired and licking nose or lips when there isn't food nearby.

You may also be able to see the whites of the dog's eyes indicating anxiety or fear, sometimes called 'whale eye' which you don't see in a dog that is relaxed and content.

The dog may also pant which is a sign of stress unless the dog is hot or thirsty.

'Whale eye' where the whites of the eye are showing indicating anxiety or fear

2. The dog may then try to get away from whatever is making it feel anxious, starting by turning the head, then maybe the whole body and lifting a paw ready to run and, if possible, the dog will walk or run away.

3. If the dog is unable to run away, for example if the dog is in the back of a kennel, the dog will progress up the ladder to exhibit a tense body and crouch lower to the ground to be less threatening in the hopes of making you leave him or her alone.

The dog may then lie on its side which is an appeasement behaviour – this means that the dog is trying to reduce conflict but is scared – this is not an invitation for you to touch the dog's abdomen.

A dog appeasing by lying on its side

4. If these fear and anxiety behaviours are not recognised or are ignored, the dog will then have no other option but to resort to aggression to defend itself.

Starting by tensing the whole body and limbs and using direct eye contact, followed by growling, snapping and eventually going for a bite.

It's also important to understand that not all dogs will move through these behaviours in sequence. Street dogs survive by being very reactive to potential threats, and this means that their behaviours can quickly escalate

A dog growling

Canine aggression can be self-rewarding in a number of ways. Firstly, the dog can learn that displaying aggressive behaviour is effective, resulting in the attainment of attention or resources or in the retreat of a particular individual. Secondly, the dog is often rewarded by a neurotransmitter positive feedback loop, whereby an increased state of arousal results in increased release of adrenaline and post-adrenaline endorphins. Various initial motivations and contributing factors include: learned, genetics/instinct, stress/anxiety, frustration, panic/grief, rage, attention seeking, play/excitement, competition over resources, pain/disease, hormones/lust, medication.

Handling free-roaming street dogs

These free-roaming street dogs may or may not be used to being greeted or handled by people. We must first look at the dog's body language and facial expression and ask ourselves how that dog is feeling? Using the ladder of aggression, you may be able to identify some fear and anxious behaviours in the dog. Recognising what the dog is communicating to you will influence how you approach and handle the dog.

Always look and assess the dogs' behaviour before you approach the dog. Remain calm when you approach and stand with your side to the dog avoiding eye contact and stay outside the dog's personal space, and ideally squat down to their level.

An experienced staff member side-on on to the dog, squatting down to its level and assessing the dog's behaviour whilst it eats the biscuits he has thrown down for it

Never use threatening behaviour such as shouting, leaning over the dog, approaching the dog from above or surprising the dog if he or she hasn't seen you. You should also carefully evaluate dogs for any abnormal behaviours such as hyperactivity or unprovoked aggression as this may indicate infectious disease such as rabies which is incredibly dangerous to humans.

It is best to use calm, minimal restraint for anxious or fearful dogs. When holding, gently have one hand near the dog's head or neck to protect yourself from being bitten and the other on the dog's back to prevent the dog moving away from you.

A dog being restrained comfortably and safely

If lifting a dog, make sure to support the dogs' body weight with one arm under the head or chest and the other under the abdomen or behind the back legs.

A dog being well supported and carried comfortably

Carrying dogs by their legs or by the skin on their neck or back can be painful for the dog.

A dog being carried inappropriately by the skin

When removing a dog from a kennel, a slip lead may be advisable if you think you cannot safely get close to the dog to pick it up. Many already fearful dogs may be frightened further by the lead around their neck so care should be taken. Once out of the strange environment of the kennel, the dog may be easier to handle.

If you determine that it is safe to handle the dog, you may still want to use additional handling devices such as towels and muzzles if the dog is communicating that he or she is fearful or anxious, to ensure staff safety when handling the dog. The use of a towel covering the dog's head, can help to calm the dog by stopping the dog seeing all the potentially scary things going on around it. A muzzle is recommended to prevent the dog being able to bite during short term handling.

A fearful dog having a slip lead placed around its neck to remove it from the kennel

How to muzzle a dog

A cotton bandage muzzle can be made if basket muzzles are not available. A muzzle should always be removed as soon as possible after completing handling or the clinical procedure to allow the dog to pant and breathe normally.

Smaller dogs with short noses that may be difficult to muzzle, can have a widely folded towel gently wrapped around their neck to prevent biting.

A short-nosed dog with a widely folded towel wrapped around its neck to prevent it from biting the handler.

Canine Catch-Neuter-Return (CNR) Good Practice Guides

Checklist:

- ✓ Negative welfare states experienced by the dog = fear, anxiety, stress or pain
- ✓ Recognition and understanding of dog behaviour will ensure staff safety
- ✓ Dogs are not naturally aggressive, learn the ladder of aggression
- ✓ Never use threatening behaviour and body language when approaching dogs
- ✓ Use slip-leads, towels and muzzles and minimal physical restraint of dogs

References:

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Yin, S. (2011). "Dog Behavior Issues." Retrieved June 14, 2019, from https://drsophiayin.com/resources/dog_behavior/.