

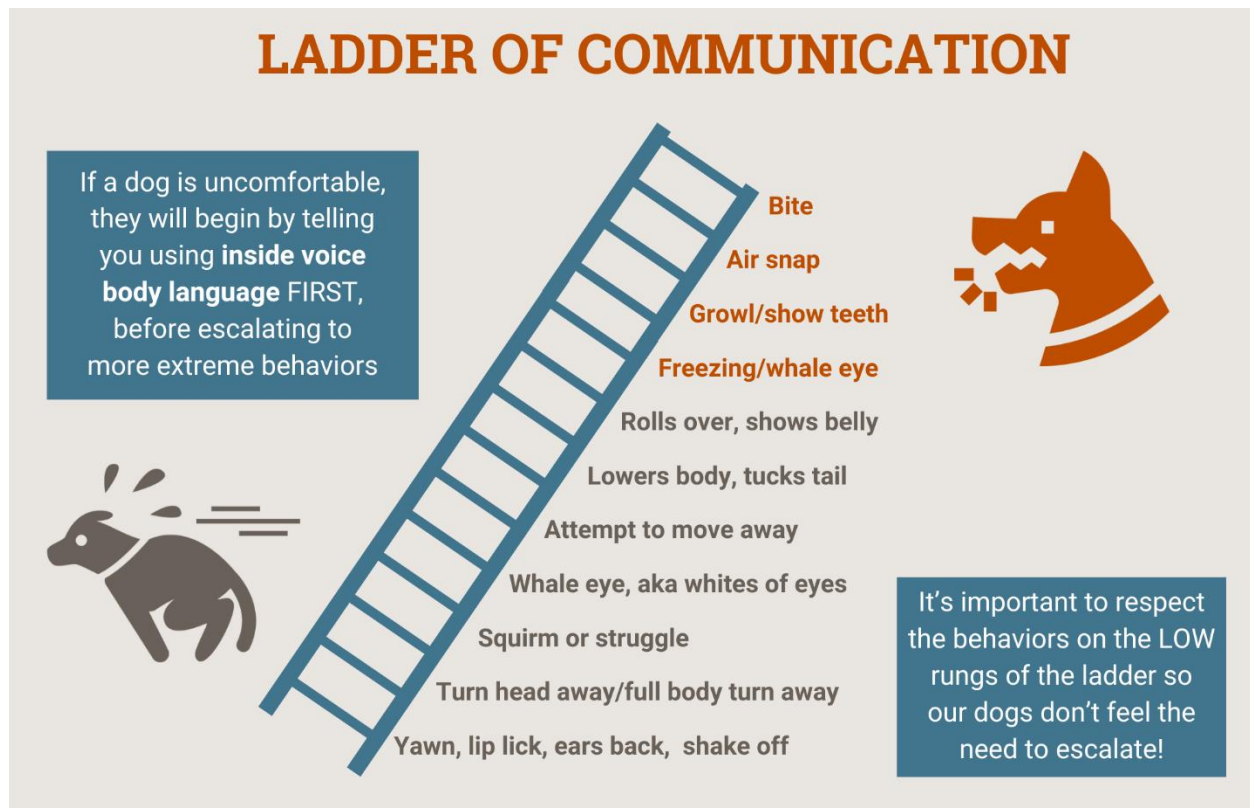


Managing Canine Handling Sensitivities

Many dogs seek out touch from people. They love being petted, scratched, and rubbed. However *not all dogs prefer all types of touch from all people*, and there are many reasons a dog might be sensitive to handling. Fear, pain, a history of invasive procedures (such as nail trims or medical restraint) or reacting to their signals being ignored during interactions are just a few.

Regardless of the reason, our dogs have LOTS of ways of telling us they are uncomfortable. *And unless their signals have been consistently ignored, many will not escalate immediately to a bite!* Growling, snapping, and biting are dogs "yelling" their signals to get our attention.

But there are lots of "inside voice" or "whispers" of body language that can tell us they are uncomfortable before they feel the need to get serious. *This is known as the Ladder of Communication:*



Your first step: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

We want to think of ways to “manage” the environment to create hands-free alternatives to interactions the dog is uncomfortable with. These might be temporary measures while you train new behaviors, OR long-term solutions you can implement with your pup life-long.

- **Can't harness your dog?** Try a less invasive martingale collar, or see if you can let them directly into a yard without putting on equipment.
- **Dog snaps when you reach with the leash?** Try pairing the leash with a treat scatter and clipping while they eat.
- **Your dog needs to get to an elevated surface (bed/couch/car) but you can't pick them up?** Add stairs or a doggie ramp instead. You can DIY these easily, especially for small dogs!
- **Dog is uncomfortable being petted?** Explore alternate social activities your dog DOES feel comfortable with like training and/or play as you work towards more social touch.
- **Think about alternatives to moments YOUR dog has challenges!** How can you help them feel more comfortable?

Handling Sensitivity: Resources and Best Practices

- **Pay attention to their body language.** Going still, becoming tense, lowered posture, lip licks, ears back, lifting a paw, hard stares, whale eye (where you see the whites), head whips, looking away/moving away, and lip lifts are all subtle body language cues that your dog has had enough.
 - Want a thorough and accessible overview of canine body language? Check out our **Canine Communication 101** webinar!
- **Respect the dog's choices when safe to do so.** Constant or intrusive handling is likely to make your dog less tolerant of handling, and more likely to escalate to snapping, growling, or biting over time. If you offer an interaction and they aren't interested, give them space rather than forcing them to interact. Allowing them choice in their interactions can help them feel like they do not need to escalate their behavior to get their point across. See our *Consent Checks* handout for more details!
- **Use training games to encourage initiating touch.** “Treat Retreat” is a great exercise for building confidence, especially around new people, and helps to teach the dog that we're not trying to trap them into an interaction. “Touch Targeting” is a basic positive reinforcement training exercise that (in addition to being the building block for recall and all sorts of cool tricks) helps show your dog that they can control how and when they touch you—and when they do they get something they LOVE. *Both of these exercises have handouts on our website!*

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

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- **Don't punish the warning signs!** Dogs who head-whip, freeze, whale eye, growl, or show teeth when they are uncomfortable have chosen a GREAT alternative to biting. They are trying to communicate effectively with you! Dogs who have been punished for growling or showing teeth often skip straight to a bite over time. We WANT to know when they are getting uncomfortable before they escalate to a bite so that we can give them the space they need. It's our job to understand what is making them uncomfortable and do something about it.
- **Become an advocate for your dog!** Many people will assume that they can approach and pet your dog. It is your job to let them know that your dog may not be ready for that contact and to give them space. Children especially are not good candidates for interacting with handling sensitive dogs, so make sure that your dog is either carefully supervised or has a safe place to go when children are present.
- **Create a "safe space" your dog can go when you have visitors.** If you think your guests will not be able to respect your dog's space, or your dog will put themselves in a risky situation, help avoid unwanted incidents by allowing your dog the option of retreating to where they feel comfortable, or set them up in a different space preventatively before your visitors arrive.
- **Use care when choosing a groomer or vet.** Many dogs require regular grooming to stay healthy. For handling sensitive dogs, grooming and vet care can be a challenge. Communication with your groomers and vets is key, but just as important is doing your homework. Does the groomer use positive reinforcement techniques, such as Fluff Dog Groomers in the Bay Area? Does the vet's office you use practice Fear Free protocols or similar? Having a game plan for these visits can make a huge difference. *Don't be afraid to advocate for your dog's needs!*
- **Explore training "Cooperative Care."** Did you know you can train your dog to be a participant in invasive handling procedures, such as nail trims and vaccines? Cooperative Care: Seven Steps to Stress-Free Husbandry by Deb Jones is a great resource. You can also use tools like the [Scratch Pad](#) to teach your dog to "trim" their OWN nails!
- **Seek professional assistance!** If desired, you can sign up for private training at East Bay SPCA and one of our trainers will help design a desensitization and counter-conditioning training plan for you and your pup. See our [DSCC handout](#) if you want to explore these techniques yourself!

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