Canine Communication in Animal Assisted Play Therapy

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Recognizing, Understanding, & Responding to Body Language in Our Canine Co-Therapists
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Risë at a Glance

- Child/Family Psychologist; Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor; Certified Dog Behavior Consultant and positive dog trainer
- Founder/Director of The Playful Pooch Program
- Author of the award-winning Play Therapy with Kids & Canines (plus many play therapy, family therapy, & AAPT/canine-related books, articles, chapters); 2009 & 2010 Maxwell Awards for articles about dogs
- Animal-related memberships: International Association for Animal Behavior Consultants; Ass’n of Pet Dog Trainers; International Society for Anthrozoology; Dog Writers’ Association of America; Pet Professional Guild
- Approved evaluator, AKC’s Canine Good Citizen Program®
The required materials for this course are listed below. These can be obtained from a number of sources, but are sold at a discount at www.playfulpooch.org.

- **What Is My Dog Saying?** CD by Carol Byrnes with PowerPoint presentation, still photos, and videos included. Works on all computers, but if you encounter problems, contact rise@risevanfleet.com for help.

Learning Objectives

- **Participants will be able to…**
  - Describe at least two reasons it’s important to learn to read canine body language when involving dogs in the responsible, ethical practice of child/family/play therapy.
  - Identify at least 10 different canine stress or calming signals therapists might see in play therapy and what they might mean.
  - Explain the importance of context in interpreting canine body language.
  - Observe and respond to stress signals in order to ensure the safety of child clients in Canine Assisted Play Therapy (CAPT).
  - Intervene appropriately when dogs show significant levels of stress during play therapy sessions.
  - Explain the connection between canine body language and the development of empathy in children within play therapy sessions.
  - Explain the difference between “tolerance” and “enjoyment” in dogs’ interactions with children, how to tell the difference, and the implications of that for play therapy.
Technical Aspects

- There are a number of links to documents and YouTube videos in this PowerPoint. They may or may not be “live.”
- If they are not, all of the links are listed by Lesson and Slide Number on the course home page. You can click on them there for ready access.
- You can also copy and paste the links into your browser.
- There can sometimes be problems with links, or YouTube removes certain videos. If you have any trouble at all with the links, please contact me at rise@risevanfleet.com!
Despite sharing our lives with dogs for years, it is often the case that we are unaware of the many ways that they are constantly communicating.

This course is designed to help you become more aware of the ways that dogs communicate and why it is so important for you to become adept at observing and understanding what they are saying at all times, including during play therapy sessions.
What Is Canine Communication?

- Dogs are communicating all the time—with each other and with us.
- In human communication, we rely heavily on nonverbal communication to convey and understand the messages. This includes tone of voice, body postures, gestures, and subtle shifts in our bodies that we are barely aware of.
- Dogs speak through nonverbals in much the same way: vocalizations (whines, barks, howls), postures, and other signals conveyed through their bodies.
• Canine body language can be rather obvious at times, and extremely subtle at others.
• Some canine body language is rather similar to human body language, and we seem to understand those aspects of it fairly well.
• Much of canine communication, however, is subtle and nuanced, and unless we’ve been trained to see it, we often are completely unaware of it.
• Humans can easily misunderstand canine communication, assuming that they are just like us when, in fact, they are a different species. (see Patricia McConnell’s book, The Other End of the Leash for great information on this)
Human-Canine Miscommunication

- There is great potential for people to misunderstand their dogs, largely because our species-specific communication styles can clash.
- People tend to make eye contact; dogs avoid it. To them, prolonged eye contact can be a sign of aggression.
- People greet each other face-to-face; polite dog greetings are done from the side and/or at an angle.
- Perhaps the biggest potential miscommunication is the belief that we really understand what our dogs are saying to us in the absence of our doing any study of canine communication.
Dogs Read Our Body Language

- Dogs are actually much better at reading our body language than we are reading theirs.
- There is increasing evidence that their ability to read us evolved through the domestication process. Their survival and well-being depends on people, so they watch all the time. They observe extremely subtle human gestures.
- A fascinating DVD highlights this research. In the USA, it is called *Dogs Decoded*. In the UK, where it was first aired by the BBC, it is called *The Secret Life of Dogs*. Highly recommended!
Misunderstandings or miscommunications can occur for many reasons, including:

- People’s lack of awareness of the signals being given.
- Inability to observe the “whole dog” and numerous signals given at once.
- Failure to consider the context of the communications.
- Inaccurate interpretation of body language.
- Inconsistencies or mixed signals in the messages (mostly in humans).

Dogs are not capable of deceit. Their body language tells us exactly what they are feeling. We just need to be able to “hear” the message and understand it accurately.
Vital for the Therapy Team!

- Human co-therapists must be able to communicate well and continuously with each other to provide quality, coordinated services.
- Similarly, the human-canine co-therapy team must communicate continuously to ensure that sessions go smoothly.
- The well-being of the client depends on it!
- The well-being of the canine co-therapist depends on it!

Kirrie much prefers play therapy to this more traditional therapy role!
Why It Matters

- We can never know with 100% certainty how a dog will behave in all circumstances, just as we can’t predict how children will behave. Dogs are subject to stressful conditions just as we are. Stressed or pushed far enough, any dog will react.
- We can’t trust 100% any dog or any child to be safe, so it is important never to leave them alone together in the therapy setting.
- At all times, we need to monitor how the dog is doing; how the dog is feeling about the activities and circumstances.
- Understanding more accurately how our canine therapy partners are doing will help us take appropriate action at the right time, vastly improving our ability to keep everyone safe.
Doing Animal Assisted Play Therapy well (or any form of AAT, for that matter) means we must learn to split our attention effectively between the client and the dog.

Dogs typically provide signals that they are stressed that are below the typical human’s radar. In therapy, we want to pick up on those stress signals at the earliest opportunity so we can head off any potential problems.
When we see canine communication indicative of stress during a play therapy session, we can react in several ways, depending on the situation. Some examples:

- We can determine that the stress is at a low level and simply remain vigilant if the reaction lasts too long or becomes more pronounced.

- If the body language indicates moderate to severe stress, we can make sure the dog has enough space to move away, or we can cue the dog to move away from the stressful situation.

- If a child is behaving in a way that is distressing to the dog, we can ask the child to do something different, or in some situations, set limits on the child’s behavior.

- We can evaluate if there are any other factors operating, such as medical changes, that might be adding stress for the dog.
While it is critical to have a dog well-suited to this work, and a dog who has been trained properly for the tasks expected, that is simply not enough.

Even the most suited and well-trained dogs will have “off” days or things they just don’t like. What bothers one dog might be just fine with another dog.

The only way to ensure that they are not stressed significantly, that they are safe, and that they are enjoying the interactions is to watch them continuously.

Learning to “read” and understand dogs’ body language is perhaps the single most valuable skill for therapist/handlers to develop!
Skills take time to develop. At first you might miss communication signals, especially when the situation is full of action.

Like any skill, with practice you can learn to read canine communication signals more quickly and more accurately.

It all starts with honing and using your observation skills.

Look at the two dogs in the slide that follows. Take some time and answer the following questions for yourself:

- Which one seems friendlier? What gives you that impression?
- If you could describe each one to someone who could not see the pictures, how would you do so?
Observation Example

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Behaviorists talk about “operationalizing behaviors,” i.e., describing even complex behaviors by itemizing ONLY the behaviors that you can actually see, without interpretation. The interpretation comes later.

For the same two dogs in the last slide, think about…

- Which body seems more relaxed?
- What are the differences in mouth position?
- Look at the eyes. Does one dog seem to have softer eyes than the other?
- Is one dog’s head tilted more than the other?

These are just a few of the things to be considered.
Knowing Canine Signals Will…

- Help you recognize when problems are first starting so you can head them off, instead of reacting too late.
- Improve your ability to train your dog well.
- Enhance your relationship & therapeutic partnership with your dog.
- Help you keep clients safe by your ability to be proactive.
- Let you determine what things your dog truly enjoys, rather than just tolerates.
- Alert you to signs that your dog is unhappy, stressed, frustrated, tired, or ill.
- Let you know when it’s time to end the dog’s involvement.
- Help you make decisions that are in the best interests of your dog.
- Provide you with rich material that you can use within the therapy session to help build children’s empathy, self-regulation, and social connection.
Dog events, such as conformance, obedience, agility, flyball, dock diving, or other competitions or demonstrations, can be fascinating places to watch dogs, dog-dog interactions, and communication (or lack thereof) between humans and dogs.

Lesson 2: Some Basics & How to Get the Most from This Course
Getting Started

- We’ll start with a few photographs.
- Take some time and try to answer the questions or do the activities suggested with the pictures that follow.
Is This Play or Real Fighting?
• If you said “play” you would be correct. The larger black dog is in a play bow, which is used to invite another dog to play. Her tail appears to be relaxed, with a little curve to it. The play bow is a dog’s way to say, “C’mon, let’s play!”

• The Beagle on the couch is still lying down. Her ears are flipped back rather than pinned back. Her tail is in a relaxed position, and her legs are in a relaxed position (e.g., out to the side without tense muscles; instead of under her). Her mouth is slightly open.

• They are making direct eye contact that has to be interpreted in the context of the other signals. Since everything else suggests relaxation, the eye contact is typical of little “challenges” offered during play. In another moment, they will look away (although you can’t see that with a still picture!).
Beagle Comparisons

- Look at these pictures of the same two dogs. List as many physical differences in their body language in the 2 pictures as you can.
- What’s your interpretation—in which picture are they the most relaxed?
The Beagles looking in the mirror are quite relaxed: mouths open in “smiles,” soft eyes, no wrinkles in foreheads, ears pricked forward, no noticeable tension in the bodies.

The Beagles in the second picture show more tension: approaching each other from an angle or C-curve; ears are pulled back and up, tails are upright and stiff, the dog at the top is giving a rather hard stare, the other dog is looking away, the muscles and postures are tenser (look at the back feet of the dog with the black back near the bottom of the picture), the forehead is furrowed.

In actuality, these two dogs just had “words,” i.e., a bit of an argument. They are now cautiously checking each other out as they get back to their usual friendly relationship.
# What to Observe in Dogs

## Details
- Watch for all the details you can – eyes, ears, mouth, tail, paws, muscle tension, breathing, stance, whiskers, and more!
- This course will help you notice more and more details while building your understanding of them.

## Context
- Watch for what’s going on outside the dog – equipment, other animals, people, movement, noise, sights, odors, weather, traffic, etc.
- Consider what was happening for the dog just before the current moment.
- This course will help with this aspect, too.
Resources on Canine Communication

- There are lots of good books and videos that help you learn about dogs’ body language. [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com) carries most of them.

- I first found Turid Rugaas’s little book, *Calming Signals*, and later her DVD by the same name, as well as Sarah Kalnajs’s great DVD called *The Language of Dogs*. These are very good. There are also a number of other books.


- I’ve selected Carol’s CD because it has so many still pictures as well as some great video clips to illustrate various points. She has an excellent way of using the PowerPoint presentation to teach, and it shows the various motivations behind some behaviors. It is also really suitable if you wish to use it with child or family clients in the future.

- I’ve selected Colleen’s book because I like her way of distinguishing between good moments and bad moments between children and dogs, the photographs, and lots of great, practical information about the interactions between kids and dogs.
A Suggestion

- One of the best ways of learning to read dogs’ body language is to take just 2 or 3 behaviors or parts of the body at a time, and begin to watch for those in your own dogs. Once you’ve begun picking up on those signals easily, move on to another 2 or 3 for a while. Keep doing this until you are more aware of all of them.
While it’s good to be aware of the *whole dog* and the *context* from the start, concentrate on them only after you’ve gotten pretty good at noticing all the different signals.

Begin watching dogs wherever you go, and soon it’ll become more automatic for you.
Look at Bodies & Context
Body Language: The Case of “Happy”

- Look at these two pictures.
- Try to identify differences from the first picture to the second.
- Did you notice that these are the same dog?
The first picture of Happy, a Catahoula Leopard Dog, was taken shortly after her arrival at a dog rescue, and this was typical of her behavior whenever people approached her.

Of note are her tail between her legs (hard to see because she is rapidly and tensely wagging it in small tight swings between her back legs), her stance leaning back and to the left, how she has lowered herself to the ground a bit, her ears pinned back, her squinty eyes, and her teeth and gums showing with her lips pulled back. She was inaccurately named “Happy” because of this submissive grin. She did not seem aggressive at all because all of her signals were away from people.

Happy was quite fearful of people, and she was trying with all these signals to communicate that she meant no harm.

The second picture of Happy was taken a few weeks later, after she had gradually more exposure and friendly interactions with other dogs and people.

You can see body language differences: her tail is low but not tucked, and relaxed; she is standing squarely over all 4 feet; she is standing at full height; her ears are pricked forward, her eyes are fully open and alert, her mouth is closed loosely. Looking at context, she is standing in a watering bowl, probably to cool her feet on this hot day, showing her ability to use her mind to solve a problem.

Happy was transformed into a much more confident dog. She was adopted into a loving home, and the family sent pictures later of how happily she had fit in. Her name finally fit her!
Many Signals Occur Quickly

- Many signals occur extremely quickly, and take practice to see.
- Ethologists and dog behaviorists and trainers have identified different types of signals.
- Some are called “calming signals” because they aim to reduce any potential conflict with another dog by saying, “I mean no harm.”
- The picture on the right shows a typical greeting of two unfamiliar dogs. They orient at an angle, look away, and turn their heads away as signs of polite canine greeting.
Bite Sequence

- Almost always, dogs who bite have given off a number of signals that went unnoticed and unheeded.
- Sometimes, humans have eliminated warning signals from their repertoires (such as growling) by punishing them.
- There is a sequence of warnings that is quite common, although not true of all dogs in all situations.
- The following sequence details increasing levels of discomfort and warning.

Freeze – sometimes for only an instant, sometimes longer, the dog simply freezes with his/her whole body. An open mouth shuts; everything goes still.

Growl – the dog gives a growl. It can be obvious, or it can be a low, deep rumble.

Snap – the dog snaps his/her jaws, often in the direction of the other. If dogs meant to bite, they would. This is a behavior where they hold back. It’s a serious warning to leave the dog alone or to get back.

Bite – when other signals have not worked and the dog feels threatened, he/she will bite. There are different levels of bite severity.
The Rest of This Course

- You will watch *What Is My Dog Saying?* CD early in this course.
- The book will be assigned in segments throughout.
- These will be interspersed by a series of YouTube videos that you will watch in order to practice your observational skills in real-time.
- It is also a good idea to begin watching dogs at home and in the community. If there’s a nearby dog park, there are usually many different canine communications going on there!
This section starts your journey to learn about canine communication in detail.

Please follow the instructions on the slides that follow.

The focus here will be on building your observation skills and learning about specific aspects of canine body language.

Lesson 3: A Detailed Introduction to Canine Communication
Now we’ll turn our attention to learning the details about canine communication signals.

Go through the entire CD, *What Is My Dog Saying?* It takes approximately 2-1/2 hours to cover it all. Feel free to break that up into smaller time segments to make sure you don’t get overwhelmed.

Don’t try to remember everything. We will concentrate on some aspects in more detail, and it’s a resource you will be able to review at any time!

Once you are finished, please return here to the next slide.
Now that you have gone through the entire *What Is My Dog Saying?* CD, let’s turn our attention to some still photos.

For each of the photos that follow, please jot down all the different body language signals you can see. Try not to interpret what they mean or to use broad labels. Instead, simply describe what you can actually see, almost as if you are describing the dog to someone who cannot see the picture.
Canine Signals A

- Look at the postures of both dogs, and how they are positioned with regard to each other.
- What did you notice about ear position? Eyes?
- Mouths open or closed?
- Did you notice the leashes, and if there is any tension on the leash?
- Some background & interpretation: In this case, these dogs had met only once before, and the smaller dog had not been comfortable with the larger dog. Here, there is lots of tension shown by the smaller dog, whose feet are scrabbling on the pavement to try to change position. The smaller dog is being held in place by the taut leash, adding to the tension. The larger dog is being cautious, keeping an eye on the smaller dog, but squarely centered on all 4 feet with tail in a relatively neutral position. The larger dog is doing a cautious greeting, while the smaller dog is quite uncomfortable and stressed.
Look at the girl and her body language. You probably have a good idea about how she is feeling.

Now look at the dog. What do you notice about this dog’s body language? Try to focus on observable behaviors or signals—ear position, eyes, posture, feet, forehead smooth or wrinkled?

Now look at the context. How much space does this dog have?

Given all of this, what is your interpretation of how this dog is feeling?

This girl and dog have a long relationship. The girl loves the dog, and the dog loves her. In this situation, however, the dog is not happy or comfortable. The dog is probably reacting to the arm over her back or the arms encircling her, being pressed into a corner with no space, and a general wariness about what is going on. The dog clearly does not like this, yet the girl is unaware. This is a very common circumstance in the lives of many dogs.

If you saw this occurring in a play session, you would want to make adjustments so the dog would feel more comfortable, possibly teaching the girl a better way to greet or touch the dog.
Canine Signals C

- Look at the two pictures of the Husky in a crate. Note all the details that you see here.
- Notice the mouth, the lips, the eyes, the ears, and the forehead.
- How do you think this dog is feeling?
- If you’re confused, you’re probably not alone. The dog’s teeth are showing, and the muzzle appears to be wrinkled a little. At the same time, the ears are forward, the eyes are relatively soft, and the lips are not pushed forward or drawn far back. The teeth showing can actually be misleading here.
- Now look at the next picture of this same dog. It was taken just seconds after the first two were taken.
This dog was actually just relaxing, resting his lip on the bar! He was soon fast asleep.

This is a good example of the importance of looking at details, seeing the whole dog, and understanding the context! This dog had been on a run and now was relaxing in his crate.
Canine Signals D

- Look at Kirrie’s eyes, ears, posture, tail, and any other features you see.
- Think at first only of the observable signs or body language features.
- Next, interpret those signals – how is she feeling?
You probably noticed the tilted head and the ball that she is holding in her mouth.

Her ears are up and forward; her eyes are soft and clear; her forehead is smooth without wrinkles or furrows.

Her tail is at an angle, suggesting that it is either relaxed and/or wagging, although you can’t really tell that clearly from a still picture.

She is leaning forward and slightly to her right, with her left paw raised a tiny bit. There’s some tautness in her muscles.

Interpretation: Her holding of the ball gives some hint of context, and the rest of her body language suggests that she is interested, expectant, and a bit aroused, ready for some ball game action.
This lesson focuses on your skill development in real time.

Some videos are provided for you to watch and observe for the body language that is present.

Lesson 4: Skills Practice
Some Video Practice

- Next we will practice observing and understanding canine body language by watching some videos.
- The two videos on the next slide have descriptions of the body language of the dog included in them. Please watch to see if you can see the same signals.
- If you run into any trouble playing these videos, please contact me at rise@risevanfleet.com.
In this first video, dog trainer Cesar Millan gets bitten by a dog, Holly. The video has been remastered in slow motion with captions that show Holly’s communications. When you understand dogs’ body language, you are better able to avoid such situations. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDb-wsQzAeI

In this second video, a toddler is playing with a dog in a way that is not safe. The video has captions for some of the dog’s behaviors. Can you tell why this is not safe? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaxCYgqh2ao&feature=youtu.be

Please continue to the next slide.
Video Skills Practice

- Please watch the video below. Please make note of as much of the canine body language as you can. After doing that, make your assessment of the situation. If you have trouble with any of the videos playing, please contact me at rise@risevanfleetc.com.

- Please observe BOTH of the dogs in this video. You will probably want to watch it several times, one time just to enjoy it, and then a couple more to focus on just one dog’s body language at a time. What do you see in their body language (be specific)?

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOJqRFolr1Q

- Which of these two dogs is the most stressed? What signals help you draw that conclusion?
Video Skills Practice

Please watch the videos below of people interacting with dogs. Ignore the narrations and titles – they can be misleading! Watch each dog’s body language and the context in which it is occurring. Be specific in your observations. In each case, what would you do or suggest, based on what you’ve learned in this course?

- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV7ITID0ehA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV7ITID0ehA)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paFpWkf_ptQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paFpWkf_ptQ)
How the dog feels during therapy sessions matters.

We need to attend to our canine co-therapist’s communications at all times.

We then need to make decisions and take action if our dogs tell us that they are getting stressed.

This can be as simple as removing the dog from the situation or as complex as deciding to retire the dog from that form of therapeutic work.

Lesson 5: Implications for Therapy
Dogs have different personalities and preferences, just as people do.

- Some are outgoing and sociable; others prefer quiet time without much stimulation.
- Some dogs like being with older people but are uncertain around children.
- Other dogs are great with children, but dislike the smells and sounds of a hospital.
- Some dogs are extremely playful; others prefer life as a couch potato.
Assessing Dogs’ Suitability

- There are different ways of assessing dogs’ suitability for various types of work.
- Perhaps the most relevant and most researched is the Clothier Animal Response Assessment Tool, or CARAT. This can be used with any animal, but has been most thoroughly studied with dogs. The CARAT assesses a series of characteristics of the dog through careful and systematic observation. It includes characteristics such as energy, arousal, resilience, sociability, biddability, various sensory features, and many others. More information is provided on the CARAT in our live Animal Assisted Play Therapy workshops, and there are trained CARAT assessors available.
- It is also valuable to create a profile of the type of work or therapy you wish the dog to do. CARAT assessments can then be compared with what the job entails to determine what the dog’s strengths and weaknesses are for that job. More information is provided on that in our live trainings as well.
Assessment tools like the CARAT and others (e.g., Sue Sternberg’s Assess-a-Pet) can be useful in selecting a puppy or rescue/shelter dog, as well as looking at existing family dogs for their potential for therapy work of various kinds.

Once you have a companion dog, one of the most important things you can do is to continuously make careful observation of canine communications. Your dog will tell you what he or she is interested in and comfortable with!
From Service Dog to Surf-ice Dog

- Please watch this video that went viral on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGODurRfVv4

- What was the central lesson that Ricochet’s owner needed to learn?
Many therapists get excited about involving their dog/s in play therapy or other forms of therapy work.

It can be very disappointing when it becomes more obvious that their dog may not be suited for what they had in mind, and sometimes they can block out that information coming from their dog.

Like Ricochet, each dog might fit very well into a particular niche, and it’s important that we listen to what they tell us about themselves.

It’s important to remember that dogs change as they age, too. There comes a time when they communicate to us that activities they used to enjoy are no longer possible or of interest.

It is critical that we learn to accept our dogs for who they are. While we can use training and behavioral intervention to help them overcome some problems, we cannot, nor should not, try to change who they are, their essential selves – it simply isn’t possible to do so.
Anxious, Shy, or Reactive Dogs

- Dogs who are stressed in social situations can be helped to feel more comfortable, but if they continue to show stress signals when they are in the office or in public places, they may not be cut out for therapy work.
- Dog who show reactivity to people or dogs, such as lunging, barking, shaking, growling, or charging are not comfortable and should not be kept in the situations where this occurs. They need assistance to overcome the underlying stress.
- Dogs who are noise sensitive, such as with thunderstorms, may not be good candidates for therapy with children who play with noisy toys.
- When there are signs of such stress, it’s time to consult a canine professional.
- Even if the dog seems to enjoy therapy work, if the dog is in a state of heightened arousal or stress, he or she needs some time away until the root cause of the problem is resolved.
Many dogs are usually relaxed and happy most of the time, but they show signs of stress in certain situations. This is common.

We must constantly monitor our canine co-therapists to see if they are enjoying their work in that moment.

Doing this provides an excellent model for children about caring for the feelings of another and taking action accordingly. That’s what empathy is about!

Often, pointing out body signals for children helps them make good decisions of their own about the dog.
“How are you feeling right now?”

What about this dog at this moment?

This dog was participating in a workshop role-play. She was not enjoying this experience. What specific body language signals show this? Shortly after this photo was taken, her therapist/owner removed her from the situation.
• This same dog went through a special program to build her confidence (Diane Garrod’s Emotional Detox).

• Here, she was participating in a discrimination game requiring use of her mental skills.
A More Confident Dog

- In her case, the special program helped her gain confidence in a relatively short period of time.
- She thoroughly enjoyed working with children, but was much safer and more appropriate as a therapy dog because her emotional needs were recognized and addressed.
What to Do?

- Look at the picture to the left.
- First look at the dog and the context in detail. Think about the specific communication signals you see here in the dog.
- Based on this picture, which would you do…
  - Allow the child and dog to continue playing.
  - Ask the child to back up and give the dog more space.
  - Tell the child to move away quickly and prohibit the child from playing further with the dog.
The correct answer is to ask the child to back up and give the dog more space.

Observations:
- Context – the child is very close to the dog, who appears to be backed into the corner of a couch. The dog has no easy escape route. The child is staring at the dog intently.
- Dog body language – the dog is leaning away from the boy with her body, but seems to be reaching forward with her head and nose. Her paw is lifted. Her mouth is closed. It is not possible to see if her eyes are hard or soft from this picture. Her ears seem relatively relaxed in a straight-down position (not pinned or pulled back). Her muscles still seem relatively relaxed, but perhaps tenser around her chest and front legs.

Interpretation and conclusions: The dog is uncomfortable in this situation, most likely because she is being crowded without any space to leave. She is not showing extreme stress and may even be a bit curious about the boy (head and nose forward). Her posture is defensive, though, and she is showing several stress signs. This level of stress is what Colleen Pelar refers to as “tolerance.” The boy should move away, and the dog’s reaction monitored carefully until she relaxes.
What to Do?

- Look at the picture to the right.
- First look at the context and dogs in detail. Think about both dogs’ body language.
- Based on this picture, which would you do…
  - Allow the play to continue as it is.
  - Ask the child to get out of the pool.
  - Tell the child to move away quickly and prohibit the child from playing further with the dog.
The correct answer is to permit the child to continue playing as she is.

Observations:

- **Context** - There are two pools, surrounded by space; the dogs are free to leave (at least to some extent). The dogs are not paying attention to each other or the girl. The girl is not crowding the dogs nor is she touching them. She appears to be imitating them.

- **Dog body language** – the black and white dog on the right seems relaxed, as evidenced by the open mouth, standing square over all feet, tail down, muscles relaxed, attention paid to person with camera and not to child. Dog is standing there fully by choice. The darker dog with the child is drinking, leaning forward between outstretched front legs to access the water. The dog is leaning slightly away from the child, but is not paying attention to the child in any obvious way. This dog also appears to be able to leave if so desired.

Interpretation and conclusions: There are almost no signs of stress in the dogs, and they seem unconcerned with the girl. They are both free to move away if they choose. The child is not intruding on the dogs. There is no reason to interfere with the situation as pictured.
As you learn to read your dog’s body language better, you will begin to understand the situations in which your dog is likely to feel stressed. You will also understand the types of situations in which most dogs feel uncomfortable. Armed with that understanding, you can help prevent those situations from arising, at least some of the time. As you are taking a walk, going to an event, or heading into a therapy situation, keep this information in mind and try to avoid those situations in the first place. For example, if you know that most dogs don’t like to be hemmed into very small spaces, you can plan ahead to have an escape route for the dog. If that’s not possible, you can simply avoid those small spaces. If an elevator is full of people, and even if there’s enough room for you and your dog, you can choose to wait for the next elevator that is likely to have fewer people crowding onto it.
This course can help you do several things to keep your dog happy, safe, and free from unnecessary stress:

- Look ahead from your dog’s point of view and avoid situations that are likely to cause distress.
- Always monitor your dog’s body language, and take appropriate action to protect your dog when you see significant stress signals.
- Help your clients learn about canine communication as well. It is useful for them to build empathy and to know how to keep themselves and their canine friends safe.
- Remember that a stressed dog is not appropriate for therapy work, at least for the moment. Stop the therapy work, reduce hours, and/or obtain professional help for your dog if his/her stress is recurrent, significant, or if he/she sleeps a great deal more than usual after working.
Learning to read canine body language well is a lifelong process.

The slides that follow provide suggestions on how to continue building your skills in this area.

Lesson 6: What’s Next? Continuing Skill Development
Stress is Cumulative

- Dogs can be put over the bite threshold by multiple stressors happening at once, when each individually would not have that affect.
- An example: A child is moving wildly, playing with toy with a strange new sound (to the dog), the therapist accidentally steps on dog’s tail, and someone knocks on the door. These combined factors could lead to a dog reaction that any single event would not.
- Stress factors are different for each dog
- Dogs are not so different from us, except their stressful reactions can be expressed with a bite if all their other signals are overlooked. When this happens, dogs often pay the ultimate price.
- When people say that a dog, “attacked without provocation,” they are really saying that they simply did not see all the signals the dog was communicating!
As we learn so many things about dogs we didn’t notice before, it’s easy to become anxious ourselves, fearing that a dangerous situation lurks around every corner. We can become paralyzed by our discomfort that comes with this knowledge.

It’s good to remember that dogs are, by nature, conflict avoidant, and that biting or attacking are the very last things they will try. They signal their discomfort long before this.

Like any skill, the more you practice reading dogs’ body language, the more natural and automatic it will become for you.

If you learn to read the body language and always monitor it, you will have little to worry about and you will be a much better advocate for your dog!
In order to understand your companion dog and/or canine co-therapist well, there are several things to keep in mind.

- Recognition of **canine signals**
- Ability to read the **whole dog** (all the signals at once)
- Consideration of the **context**
- Consideration of the **dog’s point of view**
- **Anticipation** of stressful situations from dog’s point of view

**All of these are exceptionally important!**
The Whole Dog Journal posted an online Stress Dictionary that might be useful as a quick reference:

To continue building your skills in this area, simply keep doing what you’ve been doing in this course.

Watch dogs, notice their body language, begin watching for multiple signals, observe the context.

Join Donna Hill’s excellent group on Facebook devoted to this topic, Observation Skills for Training Dogs - https://www.facebook.com/groups/135105946566219/?fref=ts

Attend the AAPT in-person trainings, as well as other training programs on canine communication.
• Other resources and opportunities are included in the remaining slides.

• If you are taking this course and want to earn continuing education credits for it, please contact Dr. Risë VanFleet for the assessment questions.

• Her contact information is on the final slide of this PowerPoint presentation.
How Is This Dog Feeling?
www.playfulpooch.org

- Workshops: Animal Assisted Play Therapy (CE credits)
- Resources: *Play Therapy with Kids & Canines* book, articles, & suggestions for others
- Information: Dog training & socialization
- Research: Reports & references
- Much info at www.playfulpooch.org
The Playful Pooch Program offers professional training to clinicians and therapy dog handlers on ways to incorporate dogs in play therapy, and it provides canine-assisted play therapy services to children and families.

Canine-Assisted Play Therapy is a combination of the well-established fields of Animal Assisted Therapy and Play Therapy.

This site offers many resources for professionals and families about this exciting and effective field.

*Kirrie says, “Bow wow. Get state-of-the-art info under Resources & in our online store.”*

Visit our Store

*Latest News: Rigo has just received a Maxwell Award from the Dog Writer’s Association of America.*

Read More
FaceBook Page for PPP

General info and funny or playful posts
AAPT Group on Facebook

Group discussions with therapists, dog trainers, veterinarians, writers, and others

www.facebook.com/groups/AnimalAssistedPlayTherapy
Other Online Courses

- [www.risevanfleet.com](http://www.risevanfleet.com), click on Online Courses
Level 1: AAPT Training (no dogs; animals provided)

Level 2: Advanced AAPT (with own dogs; horses provided)

Emphasis
Level 1: human requirements
Level 2: canine/equine & relationship req’ts.

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