# Glossary of Behavior Terms

**General Behavior Terms**

**Acquisition:** First stage of learning in which the animal acquires a new behavior

**Affiliative (aka Friendly):** Behaviors that establish, maintain, or strengthen social bonds between individuals, human or animal

**Aggression:** Threat or damage to another individual, human or animal; aggressive behavior may be displayed along a continuum, from threats (i.e., growls, hisses, tooth displays) to bites, and can result in physical and psychological harm

**Defensive Aggression:** Aggressive behavior that is accompanied by fearful body language; may occur in conjunction with other indications of fear, such as attempting to escape, high-pitched barking, etc.; however, the animal may stay in place or charge forward, while still showing fearful behavior; if the animal bites, bites are likely to be quick and shallow

**Offensive Aggression:** Aggressive behavior that is accompanied by confident or assertive body language; may occur in conjunction with other indications of confidence, such as upright posture, charging forward, low-pitched barking, etc.; if the animal bites, bites are likely to be hard and deep

**Redirected Aggression:** Aggressive behavior that is triggered when the animal is aroused or frustrated by something or someone that they are unable to get to, so instead they direct aggression to a person, animal, or object that is within reach

**Predatory Aggression (aka Predation):** Aggressive behaviors that are specific to the eye-stalk-grab-bite sequence, usually triggered by prey-like behaviors such as high-pitched vocalizations, quick movements, or rapid retreat

**Aggressive Pucker:** Dog moves their lips forward over the teeth and exhales air, so the lips look puffy and large; usually accompanied by a hard stare and growling; typically, an offensive aggressive threat

**Anxiety (aka Generalized Anxiety):** Nervous, fearful behavior(s) displayed without a clear triggering event; persistent across a variety of contexts

**Appeasement:** Behaviors exhibited by one animal toward a more aggressive or assertive animal that function to de-escalate the interaction

**Appropriate Greeting:** An animal greets another animal with species-typical friendly or neutral behavior

**Arousal:** A state of heightened physiological activity; accompanied by positive emotions (excitement) or negative emotions (frustration)

**High Arousal (aka Hyperarousal):** Arousal that is excessive in proportion to a stimulus (i.e., behavior may be of increased frequency, duration, or intensity) and is associated with negative emotions, low frustration tolerance, and/or an inability to inhibit behavior (impulsivity)

**Aversive:** Anything an animal will try to avoid or escape

**Bite:** Places the teeth on a person or another animal with sufficient pressure to cause harm (e.g., bruise, scratch, and/or puncture); aggressively motivated behavior

**Bite and Hold:** Bites and does not release; bite is usually deep, with a full mouth, and damaging

**Bite, Hold, and Shake:** Dog shakes their head vigorously from side to sidewhile holding the bite; often results in tearing of the flesh

**Capturing (aka Catching):** Reinforcing behaviors that the animal naturally performs without any prompting

**Catatonic:** A severe fear response that includes very tense muscles, lack of movement, and unresponsiveness to environmental or social stimuli or interaction

**Chaining:** Individually trained behaviors, intentional or unintentional, are linked together to make one, longer series of behaviors with reinforcement delivered at the end; can be accomplished through chaining forward (linking the first 2 behaviors, then a 3rd, and so forth) or backward (linking the final 2 behaviors, then the previous, and so forth)

**Chirp (aka Trill or Chirrup):** A short, bird-like sound, like a rolling R sound, made with a closed mouth by cats when greeting or by a queen calling her kittens

**Chatter:** Cat opens and closes their mouth rhythmically to produce a high-pitched vibratory sound; cats do this when watching prey

**Conflicted:** Body language associated with competing motivational systems, such as an animal who appears curious about something but afraid at the same time (approach/avoidance)

**Counterconditioning:** Behavior modification procedures, often paired with desensitization

**Classical Counterconditioning:** Conditioning a new, pleasant association with a stimulus or situation the animal previously found aversive

**Operant Counterconditioning:** Conditioning new behavior(s) to replace existing, undesirable behavior(s) in response to a specific stimulus

**Cue:** A stimulus (usually a word or a hand signal) that tells the animal which behavior, when performed, will earn a reward

**Desensitization:** A methodical, stepwise method for presenting an aversive stimulus that previously elicited undesirable behavioral responses; beginning at a level the animal can tolerate (e.g., lowering the volume of a sound, increasing distance from something) and gradually increasing its intensity as the animal habituates or comes to form a pleasant association with the current level of the stimulus

**Dog Tolerant:** Dogs who choose not to play, or maybe even interact, with other dogs but are not aggressive

**Dog Selective:** Dogs who are neutral or friendly and may even play with some dogs but are aggressive to others

**Extinction:** Withdrawing reinforcement for a previously reinforced behavior, causing the behavior to fade and ultimately extinguish

**Extinction Burst:** During the process of extinction, behavior typically increases temporarily in frequency, intensity, and/or variability before gradually extinguishing

**Fear:** An emotional response to a stimulus perceived as threatening; fearful behaviors include freezing, fleeing, or defensive aggression

**Fear Grimace:** Dog retracts their lips and pulls back the commissure to display the teeth, accompanied by fearful body language; a defensive threat

**Feigned Sleep:** A state in which the animal appears to be asleep; similar to “catatonic” in that the animal is unresponsive to what is happening around them; indicates an elevated level of stress

**Fight:** An aggressive interaction that often results in injury to one or both animals, may not end quickly, and is not easily interrupted; fights usually end with one animal running away or deferring to the other or handlers separating the animals

**Flagging:** When a dog raises their tail high and stiffly wags it back and forth; can be indicative of arousal, aggression, or “flirting”

**Flehmen (aka Flehmen Response):** When a cat curls back the upper lip, thereby exposing the front teeth; accompanied by loud, repetitive breathing to draw odor molecules into the vomeronasal organ in the roof of the mouth

**Flooding:** A process aimed at reducing or extinguishing an animal’s fear response to a specific stimulus by directly exposing the animal to the stimulus at full intensity until the fearful behavior stops

**Fluency:** The second stage of learning in which the animal performs a behavior accurately and reliably (usually approximately 80% or better) in the training context

**Game:** A term, specific to terriers, used to describe a dog’s willingness to engage in a fight and to continue fighting despite exhaustion, injury, or defeat (a dog is NOT gamey, gamey refers to the strong flavor or smell of meat)

**Gator Roll:** Dog panics and rolls in response to leash pressure

**Generalization:** The third stage of learning in which the animal learns to perform a behavior in a variety of situations (different environments, multiple handlers, etc.)

**Habituation:** A non-associative learning process where repeated presentations of an inconsequential stimulus result in the animal reducing their response to it or ceasing to attend to it

**Head Butt**: Animal briefly pushes the top of their head against an animal, person, or object with light to moderate pressure; generally, a friendly behavior

**Head Whip:** Dog rapidly turns their head toward a person or animal, often when touched; an aggressive threat (if not aggressive, it would be a startle response)

**Helicopter Tail:** Dog wags their tail in a wide circular motion; indicative of friendly or playful behavior

**Helper Dog/Helper Cat:** An animal whose presence can help another animal by socially facilitating desirable behavior, such as friendly interaction or investigatory behavior

**Huffing (aka Chuffing):** A small amount of air is rapidly exhaled through the nose and/or mouth, often done repeatedly; generally, interpreted as a stress-related behavior

**Impulsive:** The inability to inhibit behavior, regardless of the consequences

**Learned Helplessness:** The inability of an animal to learn to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation, resulting from a history of being prevented from escaping or avoiding unpleasantness in the past

**Loose (aka Relaxed):** A lack of tension or stiffness in the body, often associated with a lack of fear, arousal, or aggression

**Luring (aka Prompting):** Using an object (e.g., food or toy) to encourage an animal to perform a behavior by following or visually tracking the object (i.e., lure)

**Maintenance:** The fourth stage of learning in which the animal reliably performs a behavior when cued in a variety of contexts; requires periodic reinforcement for the animal to remain proficient

**Motivational System (aka Drive):** Categories of behavior that serve to satisfy a particular need (e.g., a dog is in play drive; a cat is in food drive); useful for identifying what type of reward is likely to be most reinforcing at the time

**Motivator:** A pleasant or unpleasant stimulus that motivates an animal to respond (i.e., a reinforcer or punisher)

**Mouthing:** Placing teeth on another in the context of play, excitement, or frustration; some animals may mouth to request petting or another activity; not motivated by fear or anger but may still cause injury

**Muzzle Punch:** Dog purposefully uses their closed mouth to make contact with a person or animal or against a barrier in between; may happen repeatedly with force; often a threat

**Neophobia:** Fear of everything novel: people, animals, environments, activities, or stimuli

**Nip:** A quick bite with the incisors; usually motivated by startle, fear, or pain

**Overgrooming:** Excessive grooming to the point of producing patches of broken or sparse hair or hair loss; may damage the underlying skin

**Pawing (aka Batting):** Using one or both front paws to make gentle contact with another animal, person, or object; cats generally retract their claws; occurs in play or to solicit attention

**Person:**

**Familiar Person:** Someone who has interacted\* with the animal at least three times, of at least five minutes duration each time

**Unfamiliar Person (aka Novel Person):** Someone who has not interacted\* with the animal or has interacted fewer than three times or for less than five minutes

**\*Interaction:** Examples could include spot cleaning a kennel while the animal is in it, taking the dog on a short walk, crating, or walking the dog before and after cleaning, giving medication, or a short visual or hands-on medical exam; doing drive-by treats or passing out enrichment items does ***not*** constitute an interaction

**Piloerection (aka Raised Hackles):** Raised, stiff hairs on the neck, shoulder, back, and/or tail, resulting in a “fluffed-up” appearance; may happen when the animal is aroused, aggressive, or startled

**Play Bite:** An inhibited bite delivered in the context of play, accompanied by a relaxed body and face

**Proofing:** The process of “testing” and further reinforcing the animal’s understanding of a learned behavior (e.g., asking the animal to perform the behavior in a distracting situation, repeating words that are similar but not the trained cue, etc.)

**Purr:** A low, continuous, vibratory sound cats make, including when extremely relaxed, ill, or stressed

**Raised Leg Urination (RLU):** A male or female dog (usually a mature animal) raises a rear leg to urinate; may serve to void the bladder or to scent mark

**Rake (aka Bunny Kick):** With front legs clasped around another animal, human, or object, the cat makes kicking movements with one or both hind legs; may be accompanied by biting

**Scuffle:** An aggressive interaction between two animals that is of very short duration; may result in no or minor injuries, ends quickly, or is easily interrupted

**Sensitization:** A non-associative learning process where repeated presentations of an intense or surprising stimulus result in an increase in the likelihood or intensity of a response (i.e., more intense startle or fear response) to the same or similar stimuli

**Shake Off:** A full body shake that a dog performs after petting (possibly to reposition their hair) or following a stressful interaction

**Shaping:** Building a trained behavior by reinforcing a series of small components of the behavior to reach the final, desired behavior; sometimes referred to as reinforcing successive approximations of a behavior

**Skin Rippling (aka Skin Twitching):** The skin on the animal’s back ripples or twitches due to involuntary muscle contractions; may be caused by touching the animal; most often seen in cats with feline hyperesthesia syndrome

**Snap:** Dog opens and closes their jaws in the direction of a person or animal but does not make contact; occurs in the context of play (loose, relaxed body) or aggression (tense, stiff body)

**Snarl:** Dog lifts their lips to show teeth, whether partially or completely, while also growling; an aggressive behavior

**Social Facilitation:** The presence of a person or another animal results in the animal engaging in the same behavior

**Spraying:** Cat discharges urine backward against a vertical surface or object while standing tall with a raised, vertical tail that may quiver; may also tread rhythmically with their rear legs; a form of scent marking

**Stress Yawn:** An exaggerated yawn that occurs in a context in which the animal is not tired; it can also indicate excited anticipation

**Submissive Grin:** In the context of interacting (usually a greeting), a dog retracts the lips and wrinkles the nose to display the front teeth while also showing submissive behavior (loose body, small stature, soft eyes, low wagging tail)

**Suckling:** The animal places their mouth on another animal, person, or object and nurses, as a nursing kitten or puppy does; may be accompanied by kneading with the front paws; in weaned animals, it often functions as a stress-related behavior; some dog and cat breeds are more prone to developing this behavior to the point of a compulsion

**Targeting:** Training an animal to use a body part (e.g., a paw or nose) to touch an object, person, or another animal (i.e., the target)

**Tense:** Stiffness, rigid musculature in the body, often associated with fear or aggression

**Threshold:** The minimum level of presentation (e.g., distance, intensity, frequency) of a stimulus necessary to elicit a response from the animal; learning a new response or associating a new emotional state is facilitated when the animal remains under threshold; when an animal is over threshold, it is difficult to redirect or focus the animal away from a triggering stimulus

**Tooth Chatter:** Dog brings their incisors together several times in rapid succession when encountering a scent or urine to draw odor molecules into the vomeronasal organ in the roof of the mouth; may also extend and vibrate the tongue and may salivate excessively

**Treading:** Cat shifts the weight back and forth on their rear legs, alternating between left and right legs in a rapid and repeated motion; often correlated with arousal during play, hunting, or mating

**Vigilant (aka Hypervigilant):** Extreme awareness and watchfulness; may include repeated scanning of the environment, moving head side-to-side quickly, eyes and ears simultaneously and rapidly orienting toward different stimuli, or fixating on a specific stimulus

**Zoomies:** Dog runs, usually in circles or figure 8s, as though to spend pent-up energy; not chasing or being chased

**Terms for Dog-Dog Interactions and Playgroups**

**Appropriate Greeting:** Dog greets another dog or person with friendly or neutral behavior

**Body/Hip Check:** Dog approaches another and quickly pushes the side (body) or rear (hip) of their body against another dog; occurs in the context of play (loose, relaxed body) or aggression (tense, stiff body)

**Bullying:** Dog displays unwanted behavior toward another dog and does not respond to the other dog’s requests to end the interaction; can include repetitive mouthing, barking, body checking, mounting, tackling, or chasing

**Chasing:** Mutual play where one dog runs after another

**Chin/Paw/Stand Over:** Behaviors that canoccur in the context of play (loose, relaxed body) or aggression (tense, stiff body)

**Chin Over:** Dog places their chin on another dog’s back, usually just at or below the shoulders and at roughly a 90-degree angle

**Paw Over:** Dog places their front paw(s) over another dog’s back

**Stand Over:** Dog positions themselves over the body of a dog on the ground; often inhibiting the dog’s movement

**Correction**:

**Proper:** Inhibited aggression toward another animal in response to unwanted behavior; ends as soon as the other dog ceases the unwanted behavior

**Inappropriate**: Inhibited aggression toward another animal in response to unwanted behavior that is either unnecessarily extreme or persists even though the other dog ceases the unwanted behavior

**Defer:** Dog displays submissive behavior after receiving a threat from another dog; appears to be intended to diffuse the conflict (e.g., a dog may turn their head or roll over to expose their stomach area)

**Dominant Behavior (aka Confident or Assertive):** Dog displays an upright body, tall or flagging tail, and is tense while making direct eye contact with a person or another dog

**Forced Down (aka Pin):** Dog uses their body to cause another dog to partially or completely lower themself to the ground; force can be applied with a bite, tackle, or body check

**Fight:** An aggressive interaction between dogs that results in injury to one or both dogs, does not end quickly, and is not easily interrupted; often ends with one dog deferring to the other or handlers separating the dogs

**Genital Sniff:** Dog sniffs another dog’s back end (i.e., the anogenital area); often seen during greetings; the dog being sniffed may raise a rear leg to allow easier access

**Mounting/Humping:** Dog places their front legs on another dog’s body and clasps (mounting); may or may not repetitively thrust their hips (humping)

**Mouth Wrestling (aka Jaw Sparring):** With open mouths, dogs repeatedly make contact with each other’s mouth; can be accompanied by high-pitched vocalizations

**Muzzle Punch:** Dog purposefully uses their closed mouth to make contact with a person, animal, or a barrier in between; may happen repeatedly with force; often done as a threat

**Play Bite:** An inhibited bite delivered in the context of play, accompanied by a relaxed body and face

**Play Bow:** A play invitation behavior in which a dog orients to another dog or person and lowers the front legs while keeping the rear legs extended

**Play Growl:** Growling accompanied by loose body and face in the context of play

**Play Invitation:** Behaviors displayed toward another dog that typically result in the other dog reciprocating with play, such as play bowing, approaching and then running away, hip checking, barking

**Role Reversal:** Dogs switching roles during play (e.g., the chaser or the one being chased; on the top or bottom during wrestling)

**Rough-and-Tumble Play:** Play involving repeated, mutual physical contact of mild to moderate force, including wrestling, body and hip checks, or other playful physical contact

**Scuffle:** An aggressive interaction between two dogs that is of very short duration; may result in no or minor injuries; ends quickly or is easily interrupted

**Self-Handicapping:** A larger or more confident dog lies down and/or inhibits the speed and intensity of their movements while playing with a smaller, cautious, or more sensitive dog

**Snap (aka Air Snap):** Dog opens and closes their jaws in the direction of another dog but does not make contact; occurs in the context of play (loose, relaxed body) or aggression (tense, stiff body)

**Stalk:** Dog fixes their gaze on another dog, lowers their body, and approaches the dog in a slow, creeping motion; during play, the stalker often bursts out of the stalk, quickly chasing or tackling the other dog

**Submissive Behavior:** Puppy-like behavior that makes the dog appear smaller and non-threatening; may occur during a greeting, in response to a correction, or during an aggressive encounter

**Active Submission:** Approaching the other dog with a hunched or cowered posture, a low, wagging tail, averted gaze, lip licking, and licking the muzzle of the other dog

**Passive Submission:** Rolling over to expose the belly, lip licking, tucking the tail, and pawing at the other dog when they approach

**Tackle:** Dog makes forcible physical contact with another dog and may or may not knock the dog to the ground; occurs in the context of play (loose, relaxed body) or aggression (tense, stiff body)

**Vertical Play:** Both dogs stand up on their hind legs, often jumping and making contact with their front legs, pawing at each other and/or play biting

**Vocal Play:** “Loud” play accompanied by barks, whines, yelps, and/or growls

**Zoomies:** Dog runs, usually in circles or figure 8s, as though to use pent-up energy; not chasing or being chased

**Terms to Avoid (and What to Use Instead)**

**Distance Increasing or Decreasing Signal:** Describe what the animal is doing (e.g., charging, growling, etc., or hiding, struggling to escape, etc.)

**Feral:** Free-living with no contact with humans; animals who behave as though they have had limited exposure to people should be described as **Fearful, Under-socialized**

**Fractious:** Use **Aggressive**

**Prosocial:** Use **Affiliative** or **Friendly**

**Reactive:** Commonly used as a euphemism for **Aggressive**; describe what the animal is doing (e.g., lunging, growling, barking, hissing, etc.)

**Shy/Timid:** Use **Mildly Fearful** *(see Fear Scales)*

**Social Behavior:** Commonly used to mean friendly behavior but any interactive behavior is technically social behavior, including aggression; use **Affiliative** or **Friendly**

**Stranger Danger:** Use **Aggressive to Strangers**

**Various Uninformative Descriptors to Avoid:**

Chill

Crazy

Depressed

Dumb

Finicky

Fussy

Grumbly

Hyper

Jerk

Mean

Not nice

Out of control

Popping

Rambunctious

Sassy

Sketchy

Snarky

Spicy

Spiked

Squirrely

Stubborn

Stupid

Unhappy

Unruly

Weird