

Staying safe around dogs when working in rural and remote Indigenous communities

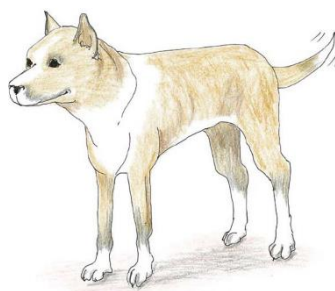


Dogs are a valuable part of Indigenous culture and are very common pets in remote communities. Dogs are kept as companions, as guardians against potential physical or spiritual intruders and some dogs are very good hunters. In some communities, dog dreaming is part of spiritual life; dogs can have skin names and some may be sacred.

Community dogs are usually free roaming, meaning that they are not often kept in a fenced yard. However, they usually do have a home and a set routine. Over time in community you will likely come to notice where specific dogs live, who their Owners are, which dogs get on and which dogs don't like each other – and which dogs like to spend their day at the shop!

It is important and useful to recognise dog behaviours when working in remote communities. These skills enable you to assess potentially dangerous dogs and mitigate the risk of dog attack. Dogs each have their own personalities and temperaments which influence their behaviour. In the community, you will likely meet lots of friendly dogs!

What does a friendly dog look like?

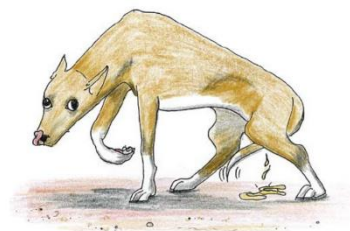


Happy dog

- Relaxed stance, walking with ease
- Bright eyes, interested in their surroundings
- Often mouth is open and relaxed (smiling)
- Ears are usually relaxed and down or facing forward
- Wagging, relaxed tail

The way in which a dog adapts to stress will likely determine its behaviour. Stressors can be obvious, such as a physical threat or a big storm, but are often more subtle, such as a slight change in a dog's environment. For example: many dogs in community are stressed by a new person walking past their house or an unrecognised car driving down the street – they may react by showing aggression or they may retreat. Dogs showing signs of aggression are more likely stressed or anxious, rather than showing an innate behavioural trait.

What does a stressed dog look like?



Angry dog

- Wide-based stance
- Ears pricked up or back
- Tail straight up
- Staring at you, mean eyes

Nervous dog

- Crouched stance
- Ears back or down flat
- Tail tucked between the legs
- May look away from you
- Might see more of the whites of the eye than normal = "whale eye" or "moon eye"
- May lick lips

Both of these dogs are likely stressed or anxious, and are displaying different behaviours depending on their temperament/personality. Both angry and nervous dogs may bite. Dogs which have a history of aggression or of unpredictability (perhaps due to nervousness) in remote communities are often referred to as 'cheeky dogs'.

Many people have heard of dogs being described as *dominant* or *submissive* as part of theories of dog behaviour. Historically, it was encouraged to 'growl back' or otherwise threaten aggressive or dominant dogs, until they retreat into friendliness or submission i.e. to 'show them who's boss'. The dominant/submissive theory has been largely debunked in recent years and is now not encouraged by veterinary behaviouralists. Dogs showing angry or nervous behaviours are often stressed, so, using aggression in attempts to subdue them will usually worsen their behaviour, which can make the situation more dangerous for you.

Tips for staying safe:

1. Announce your presence
 - a. Call out to people and/or beep the horn before you get out of the car
 - b. Call out to people when you are at the gate before you enter their yard
 - c. Ask people if they have any 'cheeky' dogs around ; ask the dogs' names so you can get to know them
2. Manage your body movements
 - a. Keep posture and hands relaxed
 - b. Move slowly and calmly
 - c. Keep your voice low and calm – you can make low cooing noises or use the dogs name if you know it
 - d. Let the dog approach you and sniff you if they are calm and interested in you
 - i. Dogs can sniff you from some distance and may also like to come closer to sniff your legs or shoes
 - ii. There is no need to extend your hand towards the dog – doing so may be perceived as a threat
 - iii. Do not crouch over the dog or kneel down to the dog
 - e. Be aware of any dogs moving behind you and try not to have your back turned to them
 - f. Never step over a dog in a driveway or in a doorway, encourage the Owners to move dogs if you are finding them in your way
3. Carry some dry dog food in your pocket if you are unsure when walking around community or when entering someone's property – this can help you distract potentially dangerous dogs and can also help dogs to trust you
 - a. It is best not to approach the dog or try to feed the dog from your hands
 - b. Show the dog the food in your hands, then you can use soft underarm throws to land the food near to the dog/s
 - c. You can also use underarm throws as a distraction – aim the food to gather the dog/s in an area you can easily see and monitor, at a safe distance from you
4. If you are approached by a threatening dog
 - a. Try not to run away, you may be chased
 - i. Dogs are often enticed to chase/catch running prey, so by running away you may in fact escalate the situation
 - b. Keep calm and slowly back away, try to talk to the Owner or call out to someone else to help you
 - c. Return to your car or another safe place
5. If you are knocked to the ground by a threatening dog
 - a. Curl your fingers inside of your fists
 - b. Curl your arms over your head, protecting the back of the neck and ears
 - c. Tuck your chin into your chest and curl around your belly on the ground
 - i. By doing this you are making yourself into a rock formation, protecting your face and body
 - d. Stay as still as you can and wait for help

For more information and for video demonstrations of content discussed in this article, please see these AMRRIC produced resources (freely available online):

<https://www.amrric.org/resources/view/staying-safe-around-dogs-0/>

References

RSPCA Australia (2019) *What is the RSPCA's view on dominance dog training?*

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Darwin Office 08 8948 1768

G.P.O. Box 4829, Darwin NT 080

www.amrric.org | admin@amrric.org

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