



# The Three Second Rule - Giving Dogs a Choice

Pet Professional Guild Educational Handout #4

Do you like being hugged and kissed by everyone you meet? Dogs, like some people, can be extremely sensitive to being touched. Are you giving your dog a choice?

The three second rule can be applied to a meet and greet between dogs. It can also be used to test whether a dog is giving his consent to be petted.

Begin the exercise with the dog somewhere close to you, relaxed but free to leave if he wishes. Hold your hand out, palms down, fingers tucked under, for him to sniff. If he approaches, offer a soft, gentle tickle under the chin or on the chest.

Some dogs prefer to be stroked, particularly on the side of the face, under the chin or on the front of the chest. Other dogs like their backs scratched, just at the base of the tail, and will present themselves to you for this extra enjoyment.

Count slowly to yourself, one, two, three – the three second rule. Slowly take your hand away.

Does the dog move closer and push back with his head or body into your hand or lean into your touch? Does he offer a paw on your arm and ask you to continue? If you continue, is the dog relaxed, with half closed eyes?

Some dogs express enjoyment by being vocal. Some signs are harder to read. Is the dog quickly licking his lips with his tongue, or licking up over his nose? Is he licking you? These signs can mean stop, but if they are accompanied by nudging they can also mean “Yes, please go on.” Licking usually produces friendly behavior.

Some dogs will roll over, showing their tummies for a tickle. However, this can also be a sign of appeasement. It could be a good idea to remove your hand and try the three second rule again, giving the dog some space and a chance to relax.

The dog could push you away with his front paws or back legs, or he could just be stretching. Yawns can mean the dog is anxious or stressed, especially if accompanied by lowered ears, squinting tight eyes and tense muscles. A yawn can also help the dog deal with frustration and provide a mental break, or he could be looking for reassurance. Sometimes dogs yawn in anticipation of something enjoyable. For example, he may yawn or stretch when you are getting out the leash for a walk. Offering a head turn yourself, yawning or letting out a deep sigh gives the dog a return signal that you are relaxed and calm.



Did the dog turn his head away from you? Show the half white of his eye ("whale eye")? Turn away and start scratching? Did

he growl or air snap? Did he draw his ears back and stiffen his body? Was just the tip of his tail wagging?

If so, quietly and calmly take your hand away and move slightly away or slowly get up and leave. If the dog shows any or all of these signals, he is telling you he does not want to be petted, and that he does not want his personal space invaded.



It is not recommended you suddenly start patting – a typically human gesture – or slapping the dog's sides or moving quickly to a different area of his body. If the dog likes being petted, you may move from light scratching to stroking or begin using two hands. Fast or vigorous petting can make even a friendly dog overexcited. You may reapply the three second rule again if you are now stroking the dog.

A dog who is feeling pain will often avoid people reaching to touch him. If your dog has always been fine with handling but suddenly acts differently, take your dog to a vet to rule out painful conditions, like ear infections, tooth decay, arthritis or an injury.

**Stephanie Presdee** LPDTI CTAB NCFE Dip. Animal Psych

© Copyright Pet Professional Guild 2015

Pet dog owners should begin training and socializing their dog as soon as he/she joins the family. All training should be done in a positive manner using rewards based, scientifically sound training methods.

Please consult the Pet Professional Guild's Directory to find a trainer in your area:

Pet Professional Guild Directory: [www.petprofessionalguild.com/PetGuildMembers](http://www.petprofessionalguild.com/PetGuildMembers).

*To learn more about force-free training and humane, up-to-date, scientifically sound behaviour modification and training methods, see [www.petprofessionalguild.com](http://www.petprofessionalguild.com)*