



Gentle Hands, Happy Tails!

Classroom Guide

Three steps to safely meet any dog — and understand what they're saying

CASEL Competency: Responsible Decision-Making

Grade Level: Pre-K–2

Duration: 40–50 minutes

Category: Safety Magic

Learning Objectives

- Learn the 3-step greeting: ASK the owner, let the dog SNIFF your fist, then GENTLE pet on chest
 - Understand dog body language: wagging tail = happy, stiff body = back away
 - Know the rules: never approach a dog that's eating, sleeping, or without an owner
 - Practice BECOMING A TREE if an unfamiliar dog approaches without an owner
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Overview & Preparation

Key Vocabulary

Gentle • Ask permission • Sniff • Body language • Wagging • Stiff • Growl • Approach • BECOME A TREE • Respect

Materials Needed

- The personalized story
- Stuffed dog for practice
- Dog body language picture cards
- Paper and crayons
- Optional: invite a therapy dog handler

Before Reading

Connection Question

Do you love dogs? Have you ever met a dog you didn't know? What did you do?

Background Building

Dogs are wonderful, but they have their own language — and it's not words. In this story, the hero learns to "read" dogs: a relaxed body and wagging tail means "I'm friendly." A stiff body, growl, or bared teeth means "BACK AWAY." The 3-step greeting keeps both the child and the dog safe: 1. ASK the owner ("Can I pet your dog?"), 2. Let the dog SNIFF your closed fist (don't reach for the head!), 3. GENTLE pet on the chest or side — not the top of the head.

During Reading — Pause Points

- **When the hero asks the owner before touching the dog** — The hero asked first! Why is asking the owner important? Can every dog be petted?
- **When the hero offers a closed fist for the dog to sniff** — A fist, not open fingers! Why? (Dogs can't bite a fist as easily, and it's less scary for them.) Let the DOG come to you.
- **When the hero reads a dog's body language and backs away** — Stiff body, no wagging, maybe a growl — what is this dog SAYING? The hero backs away slowly. Why is this the right choice?

Discussion Questions

1. The 3-step greeting keeps both YOU and the DOG safe. Why do dogs need to feel safe too?
 - ↳ How would YOU feel if a giant reached for your head without asking?
2. Dogs "talk" with their bodies. A wagging tail means happy. What does a stiff body mean?
 - ↳ What other body language signals do dogs give?
3. Never approach a dog that's eating, sleeping, or has no owner. Why each one?
 - ↳ What should you do if a loose dog approaches YOU?
4. If an unfamiliar dog approaches without an owner, you BECOME A TREE. Why does stillness work?
 - ↳ What happens if you run? (Running triggers chase instinct.)

Facilitation Tips

Use a stuffed dog for physical practice. If a therapy dog visit is possible, it makes this lesson unforgettable. Emphasize: RESPECT for the dog is the foundation of safety. Dogs aren't toys.

Emotional Payoff

The hero transforms from someone who grabs and squeals at every dog to someone who READS them, RESPECTS them, and GREETs them properly. Dogs respond to this respect with trust. The 3-step greeting becomes a bridge between species.

After Reading Activities

3-Step Greeting Practice

Duration: 15 min | Materials: Stuffed dog, open space

Using a stuffed dog (held by teacher or volunteer), practice: 1. ASK: "Can I pet your dog?" 2. SNIFF: extend closed fist, wait. 3. GENTLE: pet on chest or side. Repeat until smooth. Practice with different children as the "owner."

Dog Body Language Cards

Duration: 10 min | Materials: Picture cards of dog postures

Show cards: wagging tail, play bow, relaxed ears = FRIENDLY. Stiff body, tucked tail, bared teeth, growling = BACK AWAY. Practice sorting into "safe to greet" and "not safe." Discuss WHY each signal means what it means.

BECOME A TREE for Dogs

Duration: 10 min | Materials: Open space

Practice: if a dog approaches without an owner, BECOME A TREE — stand still, arms at sides, look at your feet (no eye contact), stay calm. The dog will likely sniff and move on. Practice until the freeze response is automatic.

Writing Prompts

- Draw the 3-step greeting and label each step. Show what both the child AND the dog are doing.
- Write a guide: "How Dogs Talk Without Words." Include at least 4 body language signals.
- Draw a "safe dog" and an "unsafe dog." What makes them different? How can you tell?

Home Connection

Family Letter

Dear Families,

Today we practiced dog safety through "Gentle Hands, Happy Tails!" Your child learned the 3-step greeting (ASK, SNIFF, GENTLE), how to read dog body language, and when to BECOME A TREE. Please practice these steps before any dog encounter.

Here is how you can continue this learning at home:

- Practice the 3-step greeting with a neighbor's friendly dog (with the owner's help)
- Point out dog body language when you see dogs on walks: "What is that dog saying?"
- Practice BECOME A TREE: stand still, arms at sides, no eye contact

With warmth,
Your Child's Teacher

Related Books

- May I Pet Your Dog? by Stephanie Calmenson
- Doggy Kisses 1, 2, 3 by Todd Parr
- Let's Get a Pup! by Bob Graham
- Good Dog, Carl by Alexandra Day