

Shelter Pup “Smiles” From FEAR After She’s Adopted

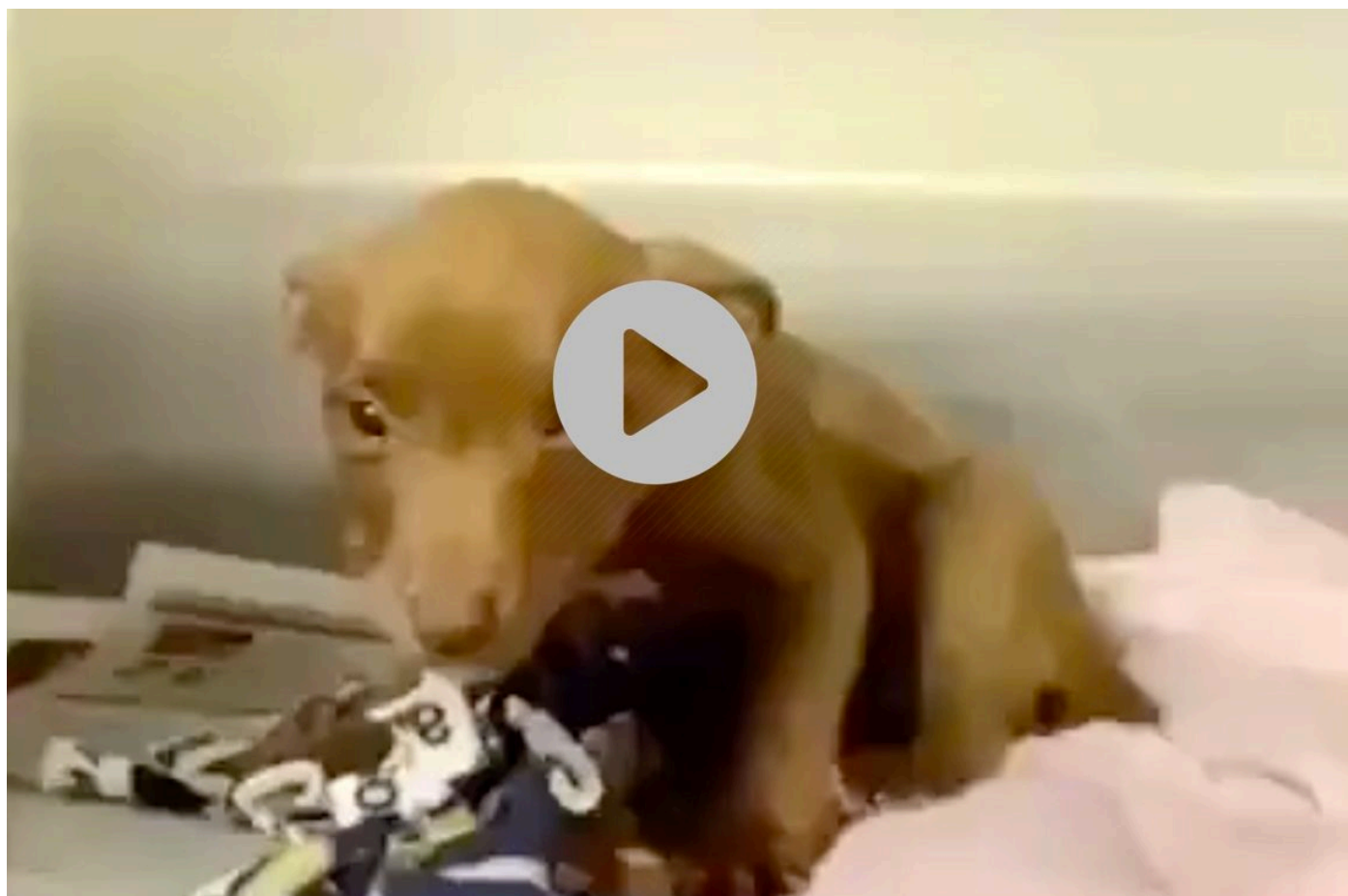
Posted on [March 4, 2019](#) by [Eileen Anderson](#)

The viral video linked below shows a **scared puppy**.

- The puppy huddles at the back of an enclosure.
- At the beginning of the video, her front legs are braced, pushing her backward.
- She blinks and squints repeatedly.
- She looks away and turns her head away several times.
- Her ears are pulled back.
- She pulls her mouth back into a “grin” that is associated with appeasement.

All of these behaviors demonstrate stress.

At the end of the video, the puppy starts to venture forward.



Dog Smiles Are Different From Human Smiles

If you see a dog with its mouth closed (or almost closed with teeth showing) and the mouth corners (commissures) drawn back, the dog is likely stressed. This behavior usually is associated with social anxiousness. Ethologists agree that it generally signals something like, “Don’t hurt me; I’m not a threat.”

The pup in the video is also showing other signs of stress: blinking, squinting, looking away, and flattening back her ears.

But we humans are wired to respond positively to anything that looks at all like a smile. We assume it indicates happiness. This particular pup has facial features that combine with the submissive grin to create a mouth that is upturned at the corners. It's cute, but not a sign of joy.

There is one smile-like behavior that happy dogs do. That is the openmouthed smile you can see in this photo of my dog Clara when she was a teenager. Her mouth is open and the corners of her mouth are pulled back a little but not harshly so. Her forehead is smooth and her eyes are soft. Can you see how much more relaxed she looks than the pup in the video?



To see comparisons of dogs with stressed grins and happy grins, check out my post, [“Is That ‘Smiling’ Dog Happy?”](#)

[Is That “Smiling” Dog Happy?](#)

Hope for the Puppy

I almost titled this post, “Terrified Puppy Smiles.” It would make for better clickbait, but I don’t believe the pup is terrified. We are not seeing flight, freezing or trembling. This pup is definitely scared, but she is also exhibiting interactive body language. Depending on her age, her fear is concerning. But it would be worse to see in an adult dog. If the pup is generally fearful, there may be time to mitigate it before the socialization window closes. The pup was showing some tentative tail wags and already moving toward the human at the end of the video. Hopefully she will come to be comfortable and happy with her new family and the world.

We humans usually find puppy appeasement behaviors adorable. This has probably given pups who exhibit them a survival advantage over the thousands of years our species have hung out together.

But my jaded self has to wonder why the sound was not included with this video. I hope the people weren't deliberately pressuring the pup. The siren song of the viral video—even of the “cute” variety—can cause people to do some pretty crude things to animals. There is a video genre of “dogs who are grateful/happy after being adopted.” Most of them show dogs who are stressed out, unfortunately. The publishers of this video (not necessarily the pup's adopters) were probably going for that genre.

What Dog Body Language Experts Say About Grinning

Barbara Handleman classifies the canine grin as a behavior of active submission (Handleman, 2008). She points out that the submissive grin can be affiliative or agonistic. That means the grinning animal may want to approach and interact, or it may want to get distance. She has photo examples in her book of different submissive grins:

- wolves, page 10 (crouching, tail lowered, ears flattened)
- dogs, page 78 (affiliative, distance decreasing)
- dogs, page 175 (with paw lift, stressed)
- wolves, page 260 (active submission, soliciting interaction)
- dogs, page 263 (submissive grin with play bow)

Some other experts classify the submissive grin as passive submission rather than active submission. Dr. Michael Fox might classify this puppy's grin as a “greeting grin,” also a signifier of appeasement or submission, because of the closed mouth (Fox, 1972).

Veterinary behaviorist Karen Overall discusses grinning behavior in her book, *Manual of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats*. She describes it as an act of deference, and says the dogs are generally showing that they are not a threat.

Addition 3/8/19: Response from the Owner

The adopter of the pup has commented that the pup is fine. She has elsewhere posted lovely photos of the pup, who is obviously more comfortable now. You can see her statement and my response in the comments on this post.

Conclusion

This video is being shared as an example of a smiling, happy pup. The caption refers to the pup being happy that she has been adopted. This is a damaging form of anthropomorphism that's pandering for a “feel good” story. I hope the pup was adopted (by kind and gentle people) and I hope she is happy. But the behaviors in the video indicate stress and anxiety. The pup's life will be much happier if her people realize that. The more we learn about canine body language the better we can treat our best friends.

Related Posts

- [Is That Smiling Dog Happy?](#)
- [Dog Facial Expressions: Stress](#)
- [The Look of Fear](#)
- [Another Look at a Fearful Dog](#)

References

[Dogs Don't Smile](#), from the blog Border-Wars.

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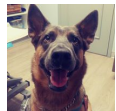
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10 Responses to *Shelter Pup “Smiles” From FEAR After She’s Adopted*



Maggi Burt says:

March 4, 2019 at 11:58 am

Thank you so much!

[Reply](#)



Eileen Anderson says:

March 4, 2019 at 12:01 pm

Thank you for the ways you have spread the word about this misinterpreted video and others that are detrimental to dogs!

Eileen

[Reply](#)



Ivy says:

March 4, 2019 at 12:45 pm

I’ve had Australian Shepherds that “grin” when they have eaten my sunglasses and ones that “grin” seemingly for joy along with the wiggle butt when I come home. The breed seems to be known for it, but I am wondering if these are both appeasement?

[Reply](#)



Eileen Anderson says:

March 4, 2019 at 1:08 pm

I haven’t seen your dogs, of course, but I’ve seen dogs whose greetings often have some element of appeasement behaviors. I sometimes wonder if it’s just from any kind of pressure. Mom coming home can be a little stressful, even when the dogs are purely happy. Just thinking out loud. I’ve sure seen a lot of Aussie grins of all sorts.

[Reply](#)



Janet says:

March 4, 2019 at 2:16 pm

If you have a fearful dog or simply want to learn more about them, I highly recommend Debbie Jacob’s Fearful Dog Facebook Community. She not only has a ton of resources there, but is more than generous with her expertise when someone has a question or concern. Her book, *A Guide to Living with and Training a Fearful Dog*, should be a “must” read for people who have a fearful dog.

[Reply](#)



Eileen Anderson says:

March 4, 2019 at 3:30 pm

Thanks for that recommendation, Janet. I agree completely!

[Reply](#)



Nicole says:

March 9, 2019 at 10:33 am

y’all, we adopted her and she wasn’t in distress in this video. She actually does this in real life all the time. She’s fine, so just enjoy the article.

[Reply](#)



Eileen Anderson says:

March 9, 2019 at 11:51 am

Nicole,

Thanks for reaching out and for your mannerly response. I know it’s hard to come under the scrutiny of the Internet, even indirectly.

I’m glad the pup is doing well and she looks happy and comfortable in the Dodo article about your adoption. The photo and videos of her at home are a big contrast to the behavior you filmed in the shelter. They also contrast with her adoption photo with you and your husband, where she still looks nervous. That’s no criticism of you; almost all dogs are a bit nervous when a new family steps forward and their life changes.

I’ll add an update from you about her in my post.

To my other readers: I’m not going to link to the Dodo article because the general misinformation they spread about animals—interspersed with good stories—is harmful. I’m sure you can find it if you are interested.

In the meantime, Nicole, please consider the larger effect of spreading a story about a dog “smiling” in happiness. No dog behavior expert or ethologist would agree with that assessment of the pup from the video provided. This misinformation about dogs causes harm to them. That’s the bigger message, here.

And indeed, your adorable picture (in the Dodo article) of her quirked up mouth while sleeping at home contradicts the idea that she was “smiling” at the prospect of adoption. As I mentioned in the article, she does have a mouth that tends to turn up. We humans have a built-in positive response to that. But we also can think beyond our instincts, although it can be super hard.

Thanks for adopting a shelter pup! I have no doubt she will be happy with your family, including your other rescue pets.

Eileen

[Reply](#)



Melissa says:

March 18, 2019 at 4:35 pm

Thanks for sharing these tips and advice. From what I read our Golden Retriever has all the traits of a happy dog. Your article confirms he is very happy!

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