

Canine Communication

Introduction

Dogs live in a world of sensory input: visual, olfactory, auditory perceptions. They easily perceive tiny details - a quick signal, a slight change in another's behavior, the expression in our eyes. Animals are so perceptive to signals (body language) that a horse can be trained to follow the contraction in our pupils and a dog can be trained to answer your whispering voice. There's no need to shout commands or to make the tone of our voice deep and angry - what Karen Pryor refers to as swatting flies with a shovel.

Dogs have about 30 calming signals, perhaps even more. Just some of these signals are used by most dogs, while other dogs have an incredibly rich 'vocabulary'. The signals are international and universal.

All dogs all over the world have the same language. A dog from Japan would be understood by an elkhound that lives in an isolated valley in Norway. They will have no communication problems!

The problem

Dogs use this communication system towards humans, simply because it's the language they know and think everyone understands.

By failing to see your dog using calming signals on you, and perhaps inadvertently punishing the dog for using them, you risk causing serious harm to your dog. Some may simply give up using the calming signals, including with other dogs. Others may get so desperate and frustrated that they get aggressive, nervous or stressed out as a result. Puppies and young dogs may actually go into a state of shock.

Basic knowledge

An owner calls her dog. She has learned in class that she needs to sound strict and dominant so that her dog will understand who is in charge. The dog finds her voice to be aggressive, and being a dog the dog instantly gives her a calming signal in order to make her stop being aggressive. The dog may lick his own nose, yawn, turn away - which will result in the owner becoming angry, because she perceives the dog as being pig-headed, stubborn and disobedient. The dog is punished for using its calming signals to calm the owner. This is a typical example of something that happens on an everyday basis with many dog owners.

We need to learn to understand the language of dogs so that we can understand what our dogs are telling us.

Body Language Terms

Yawning

A wide open mouth, with tongue extended and curled upward.



Lip Licking

Tongue is curled upward and pressed hard against the muzzle with a closed mouth.



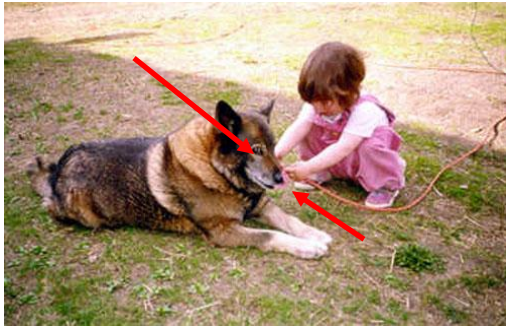
Turning Away/Turning of the Head

The dog can turn its head slightly to one side, turn the head completely over to the side, or turn completely around so that the back and tail is facing whoever the dog is calming. This is one of the signals you may see most of the time in dogs.



Eye Slide

Eyes averted to one side this is the first sign of flight behavior



Tongue curled and eyes averted.

Blinking / Soft Eyes

Blinking in all species is a major communication tool. An animal that is blinking is calm and eye rims are relaxed.



Walking in a Curve (Arcing)

This signal is frequently used as a calming signal. Walking straight at another dog or person is the main reason why dogs may react so strongly towards meeting other dogs. Their instincts tell them that it is wrong to approach head-on; the dog gets anxious and defensive. Dogs, when given a chance, will walk in curves around each other. That's what they do when they meet off leash and are free to do things their own way. Some dog's need large curves, while others only need to walk slightly curved. Allow the dog to decide what feels right and safe for him, then, in time and if you want, he can learn to pass other dogs more closely.

A Quick Sit

When dogs are playing, if one goes into a quick sit (maybe lays down) it is telling the other dog to STOP I need a minute.

Play Bow

Going down with front legs in a bowing position (elbows bent) can be an invitation to play if the dog is bouncing from side to side in a playful manner. Just as often, the dog is standing still while bowing and is using the signal to calm someone down. These

signals often have double meanings and may be used in many different ways - often the invitation to play is a calming signal by itself because the dog is making a potentially dangerous situation less tense and diverts with something safe.



Sniffing the Ground

Sniffing the ground is a frequently used signal. You will see it a lot in groups of puppies. You will also notice it when you and your dog are out walking and someone is coming towards you, in places where there's a lot going on, in noisy places, or when seeing objects that the dog isn't sure of or might find intimidating.



Dog Smile

Dog is doing its version of a human smile. This gesture is only used with humans and is considered a sign of pacification. People who aren't used to seeing a dog smile may think they are being threatened as the lips are pulled up and back exposing the teeth and the nose is often crinkled. If the dogs' body language is fluid and relaxed – it's probably just a smile.

Walking Slowly

A dog that is insecure will move slowly. If you wish to make a dog feel safer, then you can move slower. When you see a dog react to you with a calming signal, you respond by moving slower.



Paw lift is a sign that the dog is unsure and can be a signal to diffuse potential aggression.

Freezing

Is when the dog is standing completely still (can be in a sitting or lying down position, as well) and remains in that position. Freezing general happens just before the fight or flight response.

Wagging the Tail

Tail wagging that is of medium pace in a neutral position is generally friendly.

Tail wagging that is slow and methodical and in a slightly raised position is a dog with intent and a reason to be concerned.

Splitting

Dogs going physically between dogs or people is a signal. Sometimes you'll see it when dogs are in a tight bunch and another dog will walk through. This same move can be easily done by people too.

Other times you'll see it during rough play, when we may think a dog is "jealous" of the other dogs playing and is trying to get their attention, they are more likely trying to calm things down and take the pressure off.

Body Bumping

Body bumping is when two dogs running next to each other bumping shoulders. This is OK when both dogs participate mutually. It becomes a problem if one is over powering or harassing the other.

Sighs

"I'm content now and think I'll settle here for a bit" or "I give up".

Puppy-like Behavior

Some dogs act like puppies; jumping around and acting silly, "goofing" around, etc. if they discover a fearful dog nearby. It's supposed to have, and does have, a calming effect. How can this "goofy dog" be a threat?

Cocking the Head From Side to Side

Dogs may do this when they hear a strange noise or when you try to tell them a story. It seems to mean something like "That was interesting – please do it again or tell me more...I'm not quite sure I understand the meaning yet."

Bullying

Bullying another dog can give the bully a pleasant feeling of power. These dogs are not generally confident and can be unsure so they have to harass another to feel better about the situation around them.

Learned Helplessness

Is a psychological condition in which a human being or an animal has learned to believe that it is helpless in a particular situation. It has come to believe that it has no control over its situation and that whatever it does is futile. As a result, the human being or the animal will stay passive in the face of an unpleasant, harmful or damaging situation, even when it does actually have the power to change its circumstances. Learned helplessness theory is the view that depression results from a perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation, or situations (Seligman, 1975).



Shake off

This dog is shaking off water, but a similar body shake is often used by dogs to "shake off" tension and stress. I usually translate it as "Whew, glad that's over!"



Hip / Butt bump

I like and trust you – OR – would you mind scratching the base of my tail?

Going Vertical

This is where two dogs are standing on their back legs facing each other and generally vocalizing. At first this looks like play but can quickly escalate to aggression.

Chest Barging

Is where one dog "T-Bones" the other with force. This is not an acceptable behavior.

Kisses

"You're stressing me and I want to appease you" or "I'm your servant and friend" or "I'm hungry".

Muzzle nudge or single bark

"Please acknowledge me" or "I want...".

Allelomimetic behavior

Allelomimetic behavior is contagious behavior, i.e. behavior which influences another to do the same.

Dogs clearly show allelomimetic behavior when they bark because the neighbor's dog is barking, or when they run after playing children.



Roger Abrantes

Body Postures and Signals

Although much of dog communication is undecipherable for us, we are aware of some of the methods dogs use to communicate. These include at least the following:

- scent markers (including pheromones, urine and feces, anal gland secretions, and undoubtedly others we are unaware of)
- vocalization (such as barking, whining, yelping, howling, growling, grumbling and general muttering)
- visual signals (such as body postures; appearance of facial features such as eyes, ears, and mouth; appearance of other body features such as tail and hair coat)
- body movements (fast or slow; face-to-face or indirect; closeness of physical contact; use of the mouth for licking, snapping, or biting)

Of these, scent is probably one of the most important for communication between dogs. A large part of the canine brain is devoted to the sense of smell (compared to the miniscule portion of the human brain which has this function). The first thing dogs do when they meet peacefully is give each other a thorough sniffing over, and the

most important and enjoyable part of most dogs' daily walk is sniffing everything possible, and maybe leaving behind a few scent marks of their own. Unfortunately, this major aspect of dog communication is probably the least understood by humans, since it is completely outside of our own experience. Who really knows what information dogs are picking up from sniffing one another? We can only guess.

What humans are good at is using our eyes. Although our dog's very important world of scent communication is impenetrable to us at this point, our human visual skills allow us to develop an understanding of what we can see: our dogs' body language. And this is a rich language in itself. While we don't yet have a full understanding of everything our dogs communicate visually, we probably have a pretty good grasp of the basics.

The Relaxed Dog

We can all instinctively recognize a relaxed dog. The face and body are soft and loose.

Friendly Behavior

A dog who is friendly will be relaxed in appearance. The dog may also invite interaction with signals such as:

- pawing
- **gently** nudging the other dog or person with the muzzle or hip
- or any of the appeasement signals described below.

A friendly canine greeting ceremony with another dog usually involves:

- an indirect approach: approaching the other dog in an arc, as one dog circles around the side of the other dog so that the first dog's nose ends up near the other dog's hind end. A direct, head-on approach would be considered downright rude, and even threatening.
- sniffing the other dog thoroughly before any further interaction begins.
- the tail may be wagging quickly.

Deference/Appeasement

Dogs have a repertoire of very clear signals of deference or submission, which they often use with their human families as well as other dogs. Some of these are slight modifications of the signals tiny puppies use to solicit food from their mothers. The signals include:

- licking muzzles or human faces
- blinking or squinting
- averting the eyes
- tongue flicks (a modification of licking: very quick, small flicks of the tongue)
- lifting a paw
- rolling over to expose the belly
- "submissive urination", which is a small leakage of urine, usually during greeting or when the dog is excited or afraid; should not be confused with a housetraining "accident"

Signs of Stress

When your dog is feeling stressed, you will likely see some of the following signs:

- panting
- yawning
- drooling
- sniffing the ground
- scratching the body
- shaking the body as if trying to shake off an imaginary bit of lint
- vocalization: barking or whining
- tense body posture or trembling
- loss of bladder or bowel control
- sudden shedding of hair

If the source of a dog's stress is another dog or person, the dog may show signs of appeasement (described earlier) to the other dog or person, in an effort to pacify and soothe the other. For example, there may have been a time when you were correcting your dog, and he turned his head away and would not look at you. This was not defiance; it was a signal of deference and appeasement – your dog was trying to show submission and pacify you.

“Calming Signals”

Turgid Rugaas, a Norwegian dog trainer, has coined the label “calming signals” to describe the signals that dogs use to maintain harmonious relationships with each other.

Signs of Alarm

When dogs are alarmed, their sympathetic nervous system becomes activated instantly, and causes changes throughout their bodies to prepare them for a quick response: either fight, flight, or freeze. Some of this activation is invisible, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and blood flow to muscles. However, some of the activation response is visible in the dog's appearance, including:

- dilated pupils
- widened eyes, so that the whites of the eyes, which are normally hidden, become visible. This is referred to as “whale eye”
- piloerection, or raising the hackles.

These signals are often interpreted as signs of dominance or aggression. In fact, they simply reflect the dog's increased state of arousal. If the dog responds to the arousal with a “fight” response, however, aggressive behavior may follow these indications of alarm.

Warnings

Dogs will typically give plenty of warning when they are uncomfortable with something that another dog or a person is doing with them. Signs of warning may include:

- direct stare
- still, rigid body
- growl
- “whale eye”
- ears flat against the head
- closed, tense mouth

If a warning is disregarded, the dog may follow up with aggressive behavior.

Aggressive behavior

Aggressive behavior has many causes, but can be lumped into two general categories: offensive aggression and defensive aggression. Offensive aggression is a challenge to another dog or person; the dog’s underlying emotional state is one of confidence and assertiveness. In contrast, defensive aggression is a form of self-defense; the dog’s underlying emotional state is anxiety and fearfulness. This dog would prefer to flee, but if he cannot (he may be on a leash or cornered), he will try to defend himself. Motivationally, then, offensive and defensive aggression are opposites, and the body language the dog presents in each state is quite different.

Offensive behavior

- the dog’s body will appear larger:
- ears and tail will be raised
- weight will be forward on the dog’s front legs
- body will be stiff
- the dog may snarl, referred to as an “agonistic pucker”:
- the front teeth and canines will be exposed, but the back teeth will not be visible
- the muzzle will be wrinkled just behind the nose
- the dog will stare directly at the dog/person s/he is challenging
- the tail may be wagging very slowly, or may be still.

Defensive behavior

- the dog’s body will appear smaller:
- body will be crouched
- tail will be tucked under the body; ears will be tucked flat against the head
- weight will be on the dog’s hind legs
- the dog may growl but the mouth will be open wider, so that even the teeth in the back of the mouth are visible
- the dog will avoid direct eye contact
- the dog may show some of the “alarm” or “appeasement” signals described previously
- whale eye
- dilated pupils

- lifting a paw

Play

Puppies are especially playful, but many adult dogs also enjoy play. During play, puppies try out a wide range of adult behaviors (rehearsal for life's future events), including aggressive, submissive, sexual, and hunting behaviors. In order for play to go smoothly, dogs must communicate to one another that their actions are only in fun and not to be taken seriously.

They communicate this several ways:

- their movements are loose and sloppy, rather than purposeful
- they frequently and quickly change roles back and forth from pretending to be more in control to more subordinate, from predator to prey
- they use specific body postures and facial expressions to communicate that the actions following are meant just in play
- "play bow" front legs on the ground as if lying down; elbows bent rump in the air
- play face: almost a grin, with the mouth open, lips retracted and ears erect. This can be distinguished from an aggressive expression because the rest of the body is relaxed.

Points to Ponder

I have outlined some of the main features of canine body language as we understand them today. These descriptions are generalized from observations of the common characteristics shown by many dogs; however, each individual dog will have its own way of showing these signals. In addition, dogs have varying body types that affect their ability to present these signals. Cropped tails or ears, or a heavy hair coat, make it more difficult for the dog to signal, and more difficult for other dogs and for people to interpret their body language.

When interpreting your dog's signals, it is important to take your dog's individuality into account.

Consider the Entire Situation

- look at all parts of the body, not just the head
- watch for sudden or subtle changes in dog's signals and behavior
- assess what is going on in the surrounding environment, to determine what the dog may be reacting to

Stress Signs

- Backing away
- Growling when approached to be handled
- Crouching or slinking posture
- Cowering

- Loss of appetite
- Yawning (Unless your dog is about to take a nap, yawning is fairly indicative of stress.)
- Panting (Panting is normal for dogs who are hot, but the dog looks relaxed. If panting is related to stress, often the tongue will be cupped at the tip as opposed to laying limp and relaxed.)
- Drooling
- Pacing
- Excessive shedding
- Diarrhea/ bowel movements
- Vomiting
- Inappropriate or increased urination (when the body is stressed, fluids are forced from the body)
- Licking the lips
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Dilated pupils and/or red around the eyes
- Trembling or shivering (take in context - dog may be cold)
- Shaking Off (as if the animal were shaking off water)
- Whining, excessive vocalizing (barking)
- Freezing in place
- Nipping
- Sweaty paws (leaving sweaty paw prints on the floor)
- Increased activity (may look frantic or 'hyperactive')
- Excessive scratching or licking repeatedly
- "Spacing out" by turning away or avoiding eye contact
- Hiding behind the handler
- Hiding under furniture
- Decreased activity
- Refusing to interact with family; previously playful dog not wanting to play
- Confusion (may also be a medical emergency such as seizure or diabetic problem)
- Skin disorders (may need medical or dietary attention in addition to stress management)

Possible Causes of Stress

- Unusual noises
- Unknown places
- Confusing or inconsistent training or handling
- People exhibiting strange or unusual behavior (can include baby who is beginning to crawl)
- Unpredictable or rough handling
- Unusual odors
- Being crowded by people or other animals

- A person being nervous or acting in a strange way from the animals perspective
- Inadequate socialization to new people and experiences
- Extreme indoor and outdoor temperatures
- Housing or resting area in an inappropriate place, not able to get adequate rest as a result
- Visiting company - dog not getting adequate rest in safe area
- Inadequate exercise or mental stimulation
- Inadequate diet
- Humans "anthropomorphizing" animal behavior thus causing behavior problems
- Inappropriate or excessive feeding of animals
- Any unusual event
- Genetic predisposition

Stress Reducers

- Remove dog to a different area
- Block visually so dog cannot see the trigger
- Let dog have 'down time' in a safe quiet place
- Redirect dog to suitable chew toy
- Calming massage or T-Touch - check out this link to learn about T-Touch:
<http://www.lindatellingtonjones.com/descriptiontouch.shtml>
- Check for physical problem (take to veterinarian).
- Socialize dog to new experiences. You must make it pleasant for the dog, never force the dog.
- Exhibit confidence so dog looks to you for guidance
- Counter-conditioning and desensitization (seek assistance from humane trainer or behaviorist)

This information is adapted from:

On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas

How to Speak Dog by Stanley Coren

Dog Language by Roger Abrantes

Decoding Dog Language by Mary Anne Leason, Ph.D., R.Psych., CPDT