

CANINE BODY LANGUAGE



Dogs are experts at solving and avoiding conflicts. In order to communicate effectively with our dogs and to understand what they are saying, we need to understand their language. Being able to read your dog's body language to understand when they are scared, anxious, stressed, bored or over aroused is an excellent tool, and it allows you to remove your dog/s from a situation to make them feel more comfortable and to improve relationships between dogs and humans. When you are observing canine body language, pay careful attention to the context in which the behaviour occurs.

Dog Calming Signals

Norwegian dog trainer and behaviourist Turid Rugaas uses the phrase “calming signals” to describe the social skills or body language that dogs use from an early age to avoid conflict, invite play, prevent things from happening, avoiding threats from people and dogs, calming down nervousness, fear, noise and other unpleasant things.

You may have noticed that your dog tends to walk slowly to you if you call him to you in a voice that sounds stressed or angry, or he may turn his head away and lick his lips when you tell him off. These are all calming signals!

Sometimes these signals are very obvious or they can be extremely quick movements that with practice, observation and experience you can learn to pick up and in turn improve the relationship you have with your dog.

Different Breeds

Some breeds of dogs have developed certain signals better than others due to their appearance. For example, black dogs tend to use lip licking more than other facial expressions as this is more easily seen. Very shaggy dogs with lots of hair on their face and body are often hard to read as you can't see their faces and body postures as well as shorter haired dogs. ☺



How to Interpret and Use Calming Signals

Head turning

- Can be a very quick or tiny movement or held for longer. Often used when a dog feels uncomfortable in a situation.
- Greeting can be potentially stressful. These two dogs indicate their peaceful intentions by using simultaneous head turns when meeting each other. How polite!



Turning away - A dog may turn away when not comfortable with the situation anymore, or to avoid a threatening situation.

Licking the nose/flicking the tongue - can be very brief and almost like a lizard like flick. Often accompanied by a head turn. You may see this when you bend over and hug your dog, or when you are trying to take a photo of your dog.



Softening of the eyes - indicates peaceful intentions

Freezing - you may see this when a strange dog comes up and sniffs your dog all over.

Walking slowly, using slow movements - slower movements can have a calming effect. If you call your dog to come to you in an angry tone, your dog may move slower as he is trying to calm you down!

Play bow - can be an invitation to play (particularly when it is in a jumpy side to side way), but can also be a calming signal.



Rubee shows Molly a play bow to indicate her peaceful intentions. Molly reads the calming signal well by walking slowly towards Rubee.

Sitting down - a dog may sit down if strange dogs come rushing up to them.

Lying down - can be used to calm other dogs down

Yawning - A really good one humans can use to calm their dogs if the dog is fearful, anxious or uncertain. Often seen if you are trying to take a photo of your dog, at the vet surgery or other strange environments.



Sniffing - can be a swift movement towards the ground, or more purposeful. As dogs will sniff the ground to explore smells, it is important to look at this behaviour in the context in which it appears. When two dogs are meeting one another, mutual sniffing can indicate that the dogs are feeling more comfortable with each other. Sniffing is often seen in dogs when another dog is approaching them.

Curving - it is impolite to approach a strange dog by rushing up in a straight line to them (both by humans and other dogs). Using a curving pattern indicates a much more peaceful intent.

Splitting up - physically putting oneself between dogs or people is a signal. If a situation is becoming tense, or in the case of play, a dog may go in-between two dogs if they are becoming too aroused.

Wagging the tail - not always a sign of happiness. You also need to look at this signal in context. It is rather an indication of arousal of any kind.

Paw lift - can also be used as an invitation to play (picture) or is also used as a calming signal

Shake off - not only used when a dog is wet! Quite often a dog will shake all or part of its body after a stressful situation, such as meeting a strange dog or person.



Stress Signals in dogs

Dogs can get stressed for the same reasons we do! Mostly when they feel they are unable to cope in a situation. Dogs can get stressed by direct threats, jerking on the lead, too many training demands, too much exercise (particularly in young dogs), too little exercise, not having access to a toilet area, temperature, pain/illness, too much noise, being alone, sudden scary situations and changes and also if a dog is never allowed to relax and be calm.

To identify stress:

Firstly look at the dog's body condition and coat, and always visit a veterinary professional if you suspect your dog is unwell or its behaviour has changed suddenly.

Restlessness, overreactions to situations, the use of calming signals, vocalisation, diarrhoea, tense muscles, shaking, loss of appetite, allergies, changes in behaviour are just some signs of stress.

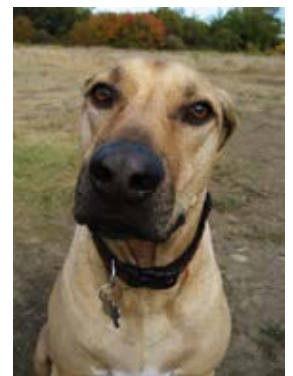
How can we help stressed dogs?

Rule out illness first by visiting your veterinary professional. Change the environment for the better, use only calm, positive training techniques, and identify calming signals to read the dog appropriately. Control your dog's exposure to scary or novel situations include your dog in family life and find the correct level of exercise for your dog.

Canine body parts ☺

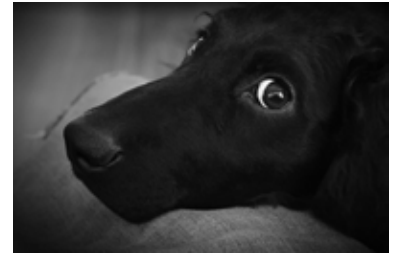
Ears

Folded behind head but relaxed:	appeasing
Held back but tight:	fearful
Back and relaxed:	calm, friendly
Forward and relaxed:	confident, aware, friendly
Pricked forward:	alert, excitement, aroused



Eyes

Averted/no eye contact:	appeasing or fearful
Squinting:	appeasing, happy greeting
Soft/direct:	calm, relaxed
Open wide:	confident
Hard stare:	alert, excited, arousal
Can see white of the eyes:	fearful



Mouth

Lips pulled back:	appeasing, fearful (some breeds such as Dalmatians, grin! Note the soft ears and eyes on this dog on the right).
Tense, closed:	unsure, dog may be undecided
Relaxed, open:	calm, friendly
Puckered forward/lips lifted:	threat, fearful



Tail

Tucked under:	fearful, appeasing (some breeds such as whippets have this confirmation anyway)
Carriage lower than dogs back: gently waving:	relaxed, friendly
High carriage, still or vibrating fast wag to tip:	tension, arousal (could be aggression) threatening



Dogs with no or little tail or dogs who have a naturally curling tail are hard to read as the change could be millimetres

Body posture

Body posture lowered, hackles may be raised:	appeasing, fearful
Vertical, full height, even weight on all paws:	confident, relaxed
Body posture forward, standing tall, hackles may be raised:	alert, assertive, excited, arousal (threatening -could be aggressive).

Always look at the behaviour in the context in which it is shown.

If you have any questions or concerns about your dog's behaviour, please contact the RSPCA Animal training and Behaviour centre on (07) 3426 9928 during office hours.

For more information see:

Rugaas, Turid (2006) *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals* Dogwise publishing, Washington USA