

Dog Body Language Basics

People often misunderstand the body language and vocal sounds of dogs. This can lead to difficulties with training, social interactions, and daily management. Here is a list of some important dog behaviors and what they mean.

- Hair stands up: arousal of “fight or flight” response; frightened, threatened.
- Dog rolls on his side or back, looking still and stiff, turning head away: I’m overwhelmed, please go away. The dog may be aggressive if reached for. This position is not a sign of submission.
- Dog rolls on his side or back, wagging tail, pawing, making friendly, relaxed eye contact: seeking attention/petting/interaction; some dogs learn to greet strangers this way.
- Dog turns head/face away from person or another dog: trying to avoid conflict; anxious/fearful. The dog is not ignoring you. He may not understand what you want, or feel unable to comply. Dogs also do this when trying to avoid conflict with another dog.
- Dog wrinkles his nose and pulls back his lips, showing most of his teeth: this is a warning that the dog is about to snap or bite.
- Dog retracts his lips vertically, showing only his incisors and canines: sometimes called a submissive grin, this is a sign of social anxiety, but not a threat of aggression.
- Dog chatters his teeth after intently smelling something (usually urine): often called the flehmen response, this is an effort to direct chemical signals from what was smelled to the vomeronasal organ in the roof of his mouth. This organ processes pheromones, chemical signals found in urine and other bodily secretions. Often seen if a dog encounters the urine from a female dog in estrus.
- Dog licks person or other dog: not a “kiss”. This is a greeting behavior, but if dog licks someone repeatedly, he may be anxious about that dog or person.
- Dog licks his lips: anxiety about a situation or interaction.
- Dog “humps” person or other dog: anxious behavior, indicates social anxiety about the individual he is humping. This is not dominant behavior, but one that indicates social discomfort.

Behavior Medicine

- Dog becomes still and his body looks stiff: “freeze”; dog is fearful, and may bite if the interaction is continued.
- Dog wags tail: dog intends to interact with you; can mean a friendly interest or sometimes aggression. Not a good predictor of what kind of interaction will follow.
- Dog growls: dog wants you to move away and stop what you are doing, or stop approaching; dog is usually stiff, may be crouched or seem defensive, tail is usually down or tucked. A play growl is part of playing, especially tug-of-war, but the dog growling in this case looks happy and engaged. A growl is a normal dog communication, and a usually a clear indication that he is uncomfortable in a given situation. It is a helpful warning that the dog may become aggressive, and it is not a good idea to attempt to teach a dog not to growl; this can lead to a dog who snaps or bites with no vocal warning.
- Dog barks: an alarm; a warning or an attempt to get a dog or person to go away; a greeting; an attempt to get someone’s attention; an expression of excitement; a sign of distress at being alone.
- Dog whines: usually nervous, anxious. Sometimes means he is eager to do something.
- Dog stares: usually an attempt to stop an approach or an interaction.
- Dog yawns: indicates anxiety or conflict, unless the dog is actually ready to sleep or just waking up.
- Dog snaps: wants the interaction to stop, wants you to move away. Some dog will snap when playing tug to get a grip on the tug toy—this is not aggressive, but you can be bitten by mistake.
- Dog bites: a dog bite is usually an aggressive attempt to stop an interaction or to make a person or dog go away. However, many dogs use their mouths as people use their hands—and they may bite without aggressive intent, for example, if playing tug, or even when playing roughly with other dogs or people. It’s a good idea to pay attention if a dog becomes nippy during play—he may be uncomfortable with the individual he’s playing with, or the roughness of the play, and the play should be curtailed. Rough physical play with dogs is not recommended.
- Dog leaves the area where people or other animals are: he may be tired, may not feel well, may be uncomfortable with the situation/activity. Dogs often have a “spot” on or under furniture where they “hide in plain sight”, and they may resist being removed from these “safe havens” or object to being approached there. It’s best to leave the dog alone, or to call him to you, rather than to “invade his space”. If you need them to leave that area, call them to you or encourage them to leave with you, instead of reaching to push them off or pull them out.

Behavior Medicine

- Dog pants when he is not hot: anxious, fearful; may also indicate pain.
- Dog's ears go back: anxious. He may draw back the corners of his mouth, too.
- Dog's eyes look glazed and his pupils are dilated: frightened, in "fight or flight" mode, and may become aggressive.
- Dog trembles when he is not cold: anxious or frightened; sometimes excited and very eager to do something.
- Dog's tail is tucked down or between his legs: frightened, and could become aggressive.
- Dog sits/lies in front of a person with his back to the person, sometimes against the person or on their feet: the dog may be keeping that person "under surveillance", and may become aggressive if they move or try to interact with him.
- Dog follows a familiar person: wants to be with the person; worried that the person may leave; or may want safety/protection from another person or dog or something frightening, like a thunderstorm.
- Dog races around wildly, back and forth or in circles with tail tucked: usually play behavior.
- Dog bows down in front with rear end up, tail wagging: the dog is inviting play.
- Dog chases a person, animal or vehicle: many dogs chase moving things as one of their normal behaviors. They may chase as a component of aggression, to play, or to keep you away. Herding breeds are very likely to chase moving people and vehicles, and may nip the individual they are chasing.

REMEMBER: In the dog world, "the best defense is a good offense". Dogs who are standing tall with ears forward and tail up are often not at all confident. They are just trying not to appear fearful, but they may be quite fearful, and may bite. Dogs who are on leash, in kennels, crates, behind fences or in cars may feel trapped, and may be aggressive to people or other dogs. Dogs may be aggressive when you reach for them over or through a barrier like a fence or gate. Dogs who are being held in people's arms or laps may feel trapped and be aggressive to people or dogs who approach.

Human body language can be confusing or frightening to dogs. Though direct eye contact and reaching toward someone can be polite and attentive social behavior among people, dogs are often frightened by such direct behavior, and may react aggressively. Approaching dogs indirectly, from the side or on a diagonal, and talking to them in a friendly way without looking at them, can help avoid a fearful reaction that can lead to aggression. Dogs often do better when called if you are not facing them directly; they will usually move out of an area or off furniture more readily if you are not standing directly in their way. Reaching toward a dog to let him smell your hand is not wise.

Behavior Medicine

To a dog, it simply looks as though you are reaching toward him, and since he doesn't know your intent, if he is a fearful dog, he may react aggressively.

- Dogs do not hug, and many of them clearly don't enjoy being hugged. You often see a dog turning his head away when being hugged, indicating his discomfort with the interaction.
- Dogs do not kiss either, and they may be frightened by kissing.
- Dogs may be threatened by people putting our faces in their faces, and may bite.
- Direct eye contact is polite among people, but is often very threatening among dogs. It is best not to look a dog in the eyes when working with him. For example, a dog may come when called more readily if you turn your head and even your body slightly away from him. If you ask a dog to get off furniture, turn sideways to him, and step back to give him room to jump down.
- Many dogs are frightened by people bending over them or reaching for them.
- Dogs often react to people who are afraid of dogs. This may be because the people's body postures are stiff and they stare at dogs because they are afraid, making them look and behave differently from people who like dogs.
- Dogs are often frightened by the unpredictable behavior of children, or by people with disabilities that affect their appearance, movement or behavior.
- Dogs who are itchy or painful in some way may react aggressively to being groomed or even to being petted.