

How to interpret your dog's body language

Courtesy of YOUR DOG, the Newsletter for Caring Dog Owners
Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University

Dogs can't talk but they have an incredibly expressive tool for sending messages – their own bodies. If we humans were half as good at reading their signals as they are at reading ours, we'd have a lot less miscommunication between our species.

Many dogs don't recognize the subtle signs of a dog's discomfort – signs that to a more knowledgeable observer are warnings that a bit may be imminent. The more you learn about your dog's body language, the better you'll be at intervening appropriately before your dog is compelled to growl, snap or bite.

The various parts of your dog's body work together to tell the complete story and unless you read them all, you may miss something important. Despite a widely held belief, a wagging tail doesn't always mean a happy dog. The following abridged Canine-English directory will help you become a skilled translator. Remember that breed characteristics can complicate the message. Note that if body language vacillates, it can indicate ambivalence which may precede a choice toward aggression.

❖ Tail

- Tucked under: Submissive, appeasing, deference or fearful.
- Low and still: Calm, relaxed.
- Low-to-medium carriage, gently waving: Relaxed, friendly.
- Low-to-medium carriage, fast wags: Submissive, appeasing or happy, friendly.
- High carriage, vibrating or fast wag: Tension, arousal, excitement' could be play arousal or aggression arousal.

❖ FUR

- Pinned back: Submissive, appeasing, deference or fearful.
- Back and relaxed: Calm, relaxed, friendly.
- Forward and relaxed: Alert, excitement.
- Pricked forward: Alert, excitement, arousal, assertive; could be play arousal or aggression arousal.

❖ EYES

- Averted, no eye contact: Submissive, appeasing, deference or fearful; may be a subtle flick of the eyes or may turn entire head away.
- Squinting or eyes closed: Submissive, appeasing, happy greeting.
- Soft, direct eye contact: Calm, relaxed, friendly.
- Eyes open wide: Confident, assertive.
- Hard stare: Alert, excitement, arousal; could be play arousal or aggression arousal.

❖ MOUTH

- Lips pulled back: Submissive, appeasing or fearful; may also be lifted in submissive grin or aggressive grin.
- Licking lips, yawning: Stressed, fearful – or tired.
- Lips relaxed: Calm, relaxed, friendly.
- Lips puckered forward, may be lifted in a slight snarl: Assertive, threat.

❖ HAIR

- Piloerection (hair standing on end) or raised hackles: Arousal. While it can indicate aggression, dogs may also piloerect when they are fearful, uncertain or engaged in excited play.

❖ BODY POSTURE

- Lowered rump, hackles may be raised: Submissive, appeasing or fearful
- Standing at full height: Confident, relaxed.
- Shoulders lowered, hindquarters elevated: A play bow – clear invitation to play.

❖ LOWER RANK VERSUS HIGHER RANK

- A lower ranking member of a social group offers behaviors to a higher ranking member to promote group tranquility and his own safety. When offered in conjunction with other behaviors however they can also indicate stress. Appeasement and deference signals include:
 - ❖ Slow movement: Lower ranking dog appears to be moving in slow motion.
 - ❖ Lip licking: Lower ranking dog licks at the mouth of the higher ranking member
 - ❖ Sitting, lying down and exposing underside: Lower ranking dog offers submission by lowering body posture, exposing vulnerable parts.
 - ❖ Turning head away, averting eyes: Lower ranking dog avoids eye contact, exposes neck.
 - ❖ Avoidance is another stress signal. A dog will turn away, shut down and evade a handler's touch and treats. His brow may furrow and muscles on the forehead and around the eyes may develop ridges.

❖ DISPLACEMENT BEHAVIORS

- Displacement behaviors are efforts to resolve an internal conflict for the dog – unrelated to hierarchy. They include:
 - Rapid eye blinking.
 - Nose licking – dog's tongue flicks out once or multiple times.
 - Chattering teeth.
 - Scratching.
 - Drooling may be an indication of stress, a response to the presence of food or an indication of a mouth injury or digestive distress.
 - Shaking off as if set, but the dog is dry.

❖ MORE GENERAL SIGNS OF STRESS:

- Excessive grooming: The dog may lick or chew paws, legs, flank, tail and genital areas to the point of self-mutilation.
- Hyperactivity: Frantic behavior, pacing, sometimes misinterpreted as ignoring or blowing off owner.
- Lack of attention and focus: The stressed brain has difficulty processing information.
- Leaning and clinging: The dog seeks contact with a human as reassurance.
- Lowered body posture: Slinking, acting "guilty" or "sneaky". These are misinterpretations of dogs' body language – attributing human characteristics to them.
- Mouthing: Willingness to use mouth on human skin. It can be puppy exploration or adult poor manners, but can also be an express of stress, ranging from gentle nibbling (flea biting) to hard taking of treats to painfully hard mouthing, snapping or biting.
- Panting: Rapid shallow or heavy breathing. It can be normal if the dog is warm or has been exercising.
- Stretching: To relax stress-related tension in muscles. May also occur after sleeping or staying in one place for extended periods.
- Stiff movement: Tension can cause a noticeable stiffness in leg, body and tail movements.
- Sweaty paws: Damp footprints can be seen on floors, exam tables, rubber mats, etc.
- Trembling: May be due to stress if not cold.
- Whining: High-pitched vocalization, irritating to most humans. While some may interpret it as excitement, a dog who is excited to the point of whining is also stressed.

Canine Postures – Do You Know the Difference?

AGGRESSIVE ATTACK

This threatening posture is used to chase another away or, if need be, to attack in order to protect possessions, pack or self.

AROUSAL

The dog has been stimulated by something in his environment. When the dog is excited by something pleasurable, the hackles will be down and the tail will be carried a little lower and will loosely wag. The muzzle will be relaxed and the tongue may be seen. This posture may be displayed to subordinates in order to express higher ranking pack position.

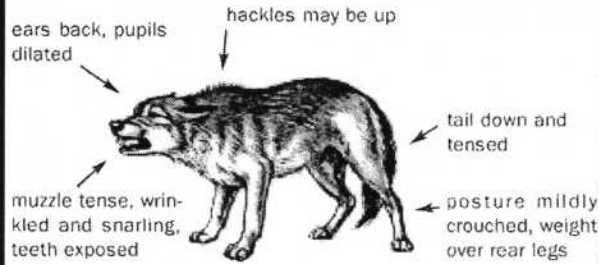
NEUTRAL RELAXED

ACTIVE SUBMISSION

This pacifying posture is used when a dog acknowledges another dog or human's higher social ranking, or to inhibit another's aggression.

PASSIVE SUBMISSION

Bellying up indicates surrender, a pacifying gesture offered to a more dominant or aggressive individual.



DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION

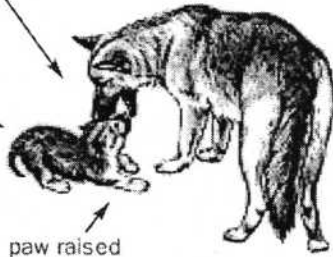
When fearful, a dog will give warning signals to indicate he does not wish to be approached. If, unheeded, he will bite to protect himself.

mother quickly snarls and places mouth around muzzle or head of puppy

puppy submits by flattening to the ground and whimpering

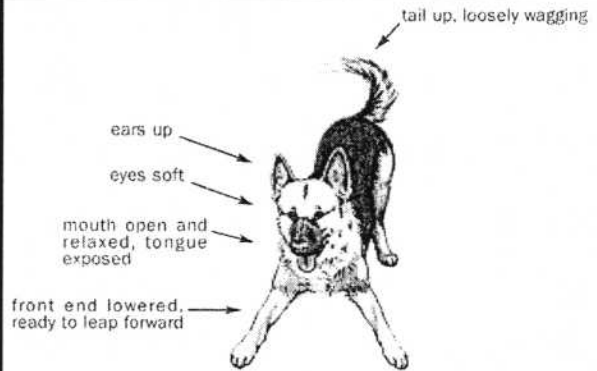
tail tucked

paw raised



MATERNAL CORRECTION

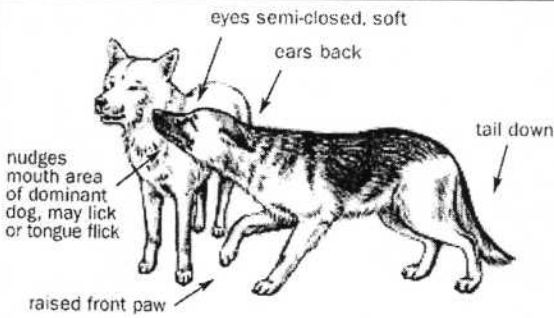
A mother dog will discipline a pup with a quick muzzle grasp. The pup learns to offer submissive body postures.



PLAY SOLICITATION

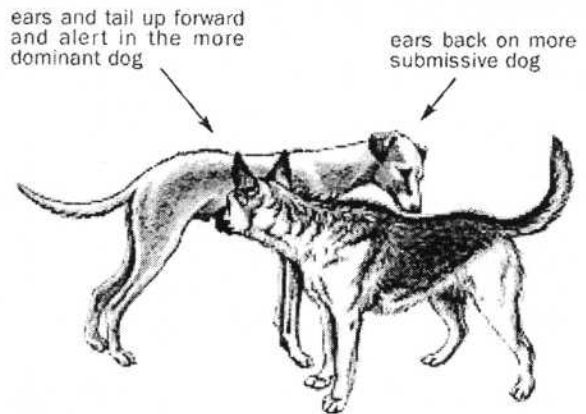
The play bow is a combination of dominant and submissive gestures. It is offered to invite another to play or as part of courtship behavior.

Canine Greeting Postures



GREETING BEHAVIOR

A submissive dog may greet a more dominant dog with a muzzle nudge as an appeasement (pacifying) gesture.



GREETING POSTURE

Dogs sniff each other's genital region when greeting to gather information on sexual status.