

[Home](#) >> [Dog Training](#) >> [Understanding Dogs](#) >> Canine Body Language

CANINE BODY LANGUAGE

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Because dogs don't speak our language, the only way to truly comprehend and communicate with them is for us to understand and appreciate what they are telling us through their body and vocal language. Often, gestures or actions that we assume mean one thing are actually the dog telling us the exact opposite, and determining what that wagging tail or exposed tummy really means can sometimes be the difference between a belly rub and a bite.

Dogs communicate using a complex language of body signals that reflect what they are thinking and feeling. They use these signals consciously and unconsciously to communicate intent and ensure their personal safety by affecting behavior in others.



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Appeasement & Displacement

A dog might try to appease another by actively seeking attention via one or more of the following behaviors:

- muzzle and/or ear licking
- jumping up
- lowering and curving the body
- blinking
- clacking or exposing the teeth (“smiling”)
- lip licking
- lowering the head and ears
- play bowing

Although much appeasement consists of this active body language, passive submission such as cowering and body freezing seems to be done in response to escalating fear in the presence of a perceived threat. A socially experienced dog receiving these signals will tolerate this language of appeasement and reciprocate with appropriate signals; other less experienced dogs might take advantage of this deference and attempt to control or aggress.

In addition to appeasement, dogs also commonly use displacement signals to avoid confrontation. These body signals are used to provide a distraction – a way of covering up what the dog is actually feeling. Yawning, sniffing, scratching, sneezing, and licking are all active behaviors that keep the dog calm and provide a distraction to refocus the attention of others away from him.

Common Body Language

Any signal that is demonstrated by a particular part of the dog's body must always be read in the context of whatever other body or *vocal language* the dog is communicating. Similar signals have different meanings in different situations, so the position of the body and other vocal signals will help you understand a dog's intent and emotional state.

Stress/Discomfort/Nervousness Language

When dogs are stressed and nervous they exhibit many different kinds of behavior that either help relieve the stress they are feeling or appease a perceived threat. While dogs like humans, yawn when they are tired, they are also much more likely to yawn when they are nervous. Lip licking does not always mean a dog is hungry or has just eaten either, but is a very clear stress signal that is performed when a dog is nervous or experiencing *fear*.

- Yawning can be a sign that a dog is tired, but it also signals stress
- Lip licking or tongue flicking. Dogs lick their lips when nervous
- Brief body freezing – the dog is still for a few seconds before reacting
- Body freezing – the dog freezes until the threat goes away or he decides to use fight or flight
- 'Whale Eye' – the dog turns his head away but keeps looking at the perceived threat, showing the whites of his eyes
- Head turn – the dog will turn his head away from a fear source as a gesture of appeasement
- Furrowed brow, curved eyebrows – caused by facial tension
- Tense jaw – the mouth is closed, and the dog is preparing for action
- Hugging – a dog will gain comfort by holding onto his owner
- Low tail carriage – indicates discomfort and uncertainty
- Curved tongue – the tongue is curved at the edges from tension
- Raspy, dry-sounding panting – nervousness reduces saliva production
- Twitching whiskers – caused by facial tension
- Shaking – caused by adrenaline release
- Drooling – stress can also cause excessive salivation
- Lack of focus – an anxious dog finds learning difficult
- Sweaty paws – dogs sweat through their foot pads
- Piloerection – the hair on a dog's neck and spine stands on end (like human goose bumps), making the dog appear bigger while releasing odor from the glands contained in the dog's hair follicles

Appeasement/Deference Language

Deference language is designed to appease a perceived threat, avoid injury and is crucial for survival. If the dog engages in non-threatening behavior this helps deescalate the negative intentions of another ani-

mal or human. Most appeasement behavior is extremely submissive with the dog lowering the body, making it appear smaller and less threatening. Socially appropriate dogs will respond positively to this deference while others often take advantage of what they perceive as weakness.

- Head bobbing or lowering
- Head turning
- Averting eyes
- Lip licking
- Low tail carriage
- Tail tucked between the legs
- Curved and lowered body
- Stomach flip – the dog flips over quickly, exposing his stomach; he is not asking for a belly rub, but signaling that he is withdrawing from interaction

Curious/Anticipatory Language

Dogs are naturally curious animals and the more confident they are, the more they can deal with novelty and change. All dogs will size up any situation to ensure safety using the following language:

- Head cocked to one side or the other
- Front paw lifted - anticipating what will happen and what the dog should do next
- Mouth closed - sizing up the situation in preparation for action

Displacement Language

Displacement language helps the dog to self-calm and refocus attention away from them and onto something else. If a perceived or actual threat approaches and the dog is nervous or uncomfortable she will often indulge in behaviors that take the threat's focus away from what could be a negative intention. The threat's attention is diverted onto the behavior the dog is doing, like sniffing the ground or scratching and not actually the dog herself. These behaviors are often performed when the dog needs an outlet for their pent up energy or frustration, but can become compulsive if the outlets are not given. Displacement behaviors can result in compulsive behaviors including excessive spinning or licking.

- Sneezing
- Shaking
- Sniffing
- Nose licking
- Yawning
- Spinning
- Pacing
- Chattering teeth
- Shake off - dog will release stress and tension by shaking their bodies as if trying to get water off their backs.

Defensive and Offensive Language

When a dog has to defend herself from an actual or perceived threat she will demonstrate defensive or offensive language in order to keep herself safe. This language manifests itself in behaviors that encourage a threat to keep their distance. If the threat does not back away and the dog has nowhere to go, defensive behavior will turn offensive and the dog will bite. These behaviors are usually easy to recognize and understand.

- Body leaning forward
- Tense mouth

- Lips pushed forward and vibrating as the dog growls
- Air snapping - the dog snaps in the air to warn something to back away
- Snapping with skin contact - also a warning to back away
- Fast nip – an immediate bite and release with bruising or slight wound, telling a threat to back off
- Deeper bite – a dog that bites with more intensity is intending to harm
- Bite and hold - intent to harm
- Bite, hold, and shake – intent to harm and potentially to kill. Some dogs will bite, hold, shake, and disembowel stuffed toys, simulating the killing of prey; while this is prevalent among dogs with high prey drive, even dogs with low drive can indulge in behavior of this type. If your dog likes to disembowel stuffed toys, this doesn't mean he wants to do the same with people or other animals. Sadie loves to disembowel toys, but she is incredibly gentle with people, especially children.
- Wagging tail – again, a wagging tail does not always mean a happy dog
- Hard, staring eyes

Relaxed Language

There is nothing better than being with a happy dog. The body is fluid and relaxed, the mouth is slightly open with tongue hanging to the side and all the signals a dog gives off communicate joy, confidence and a desire to invite play and attention.

- Mouth slightly open, tongue relaxed and lolling to one side.
- Small body freezes during play.
- Play bow – this signal invites play and tells others that whatever action comes next is still just play.
- Turning over, inviting belly rub – showing trust and enjoying social contact.
- Relaxed facial expression.
- Squinty or blinking eyes.
- Tail wagging fast, either side to side or in a round motion like a helicopter.
- Wiggling backside.

What does a wagging tail mean?

Tail wagging is a frequently misinterpreted signal. Most people believe that a wagging tail only means a dog is happy, which of course is often true, but some dogs also wag their tails when aroused, overstimulated and frustrated. You can usually tell the difference by looking at what the rest of the body is doing:

- A confident or aroused dog will hold his tail in the air, allowing scent from the anal glands to circulate more freely and advertise his presence.
- A dog that is wagging his tail but barking with a defensive body posture, tense face, and hard staring eyes is overly aroused and frustrated, which means that he should not be approached.
- A tail that is held low or between the legs signals a lack of confidence, nervousness, or fear
- A tail that is held high but wagged more slowly means that the dog is assessing a situation.
- A tail that is extended and curved means that the dog is tense and ready to take offensive or defensive action.
- A tail that wags around and around like a helicopter and is accompanied by relaxed fluid body movement and a wiggling bottom signals friendliness and a willingness to engage.
- Research has shown that when a dog sees someone they like, his tail wags more to the right. When he sees an unfamiliar person, his tail wags more to the left. Subtle body language like this is easy to miss.

The tail is important for both balance and signaling, which is why the practice of tail docking, or partial removal of a dog's tail, is so harmful. Because the tail is a prime indicator of mood, dogs with docked tails

are unable to communicate properly using that part of their body, which means that other dogs and people miss vital signals.

Related Reading:

- *What I'm Trying to Say*
- *How to Greet a Dog*
- *How to Safely Introduce Your Dog to Your New Baby*

Tags: *body language, canine body language, dog body language, understanding dogs*

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

23 THOUGHTS ON "CANINE BODY LANGUAGE"

- 1.  **Gayle Woods Huff**
July 14, 2015 at 2:50 pm

Ha our dog is a master communicator! Yesterday we went to the dog park in the morning, left disappointed since no one was there. We went again in the evening, tons of dogs, much much fun. This morning I was going to take him to the park again. I called him to jump up in the car but he resolutely stood on the sidewalk looking at me like, no thanks and turned toward our walking route.

EXPAND COMMENTS

WARNING: *DO* TRY THIS AT HOME!
TAG US IN YOUR DOG TRAINING PHOTOS & VIDEOS



#POSITIVELYDOG



KINDNESS IS POWERFUL
PASS IT ON.

Victoria Stilwell

