

# University of Denver-Graduate School of Social Work

## Dog Stress and Calming Signals

Dog body language is very expressive and can tell humans quite a bit if they know what to look for. Some of the lesser-known stress signals include:<sup>4,5</sup>

- Yawning
- Scratching
- Panting
- Licking lips
- Low and slowly wagging tail

When working with at-risk youth and/or people who have experienced a traumatic event it is especially necessary for the handlers and practitioner or interviewer to communicate ways in which the handler can care for dog while also working towards the session objective. This might mean taking the dog out of the room or away from the stressor. Here are some suggestions to try to calm the dog without leaving the room or during a break:<sup>7</sup>

- Make the setting a safe space for the dog. Allow the dog to get familiar with the room before the session and, if possible, place the dog's bed or crate in a corner for it to retreat without interrupting the session.
- Allow the victim or client to give the dog a chew toy. Chewing can relieve stress in dogs.
- Massage the dog's ears and/or head with light, steady pressure. This technique is best used out away from the stressor.

If the dog is showing signs of significant stress it might be best to take a break. Without making the victim or client uncomfortable the handler might suggest the dog needs a bathroom break or needs a drink of water.



**Licking Lips**  
when no food nearby



**Panting**  
when not hot or thirsty



**Brows Furrowed, Ears to Side**



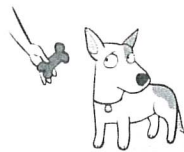
**Moving in Slow Motion**  
walking slow on floor



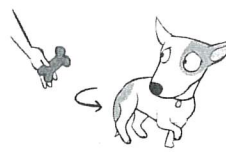
**Acting Sleepy or Yawning**  
when they shouldn't be tired



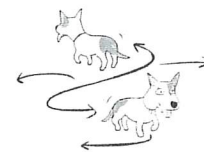
**Hypervigilant**  
looking in many directions



**Suddenly Won't Eat**  
but was hungry earlier



**Moving Away**



**Pacing**

## Telling Tail Positions<sup>6</sup>

Happy & Content

Anxious & Stressed

Relaxed



Tucked



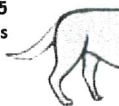
High and wagging quickly



In line with spine



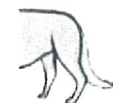
Relaxed at 45 degrees



High and rigid



Low and wagging slowly



4) Yin, Sophia. *Body Language of Fear in Dogs*, The Art & Science of Animal Behavior. Retrieved from <http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/dog-bite-prevention-week-poster-on-the-body-language-of-fear-and-aggression>

5) P. McCordle, S. McCune, J.A. Griffin, L. Esposito, & L.S. Freund (2011) (Eds.), *Animals in our lives: Human-animal interaction in family, community, & therapeutic settings*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

6) Rose, Iez. *Talking Dog* (2011). Retrieved from

7) Wasserman, Elizabeth. *DeStress With Your Dog*, The Dog Daily. Retrieved from [http://www.thedogdaily.com/conduct/bonding/destress\\_your\\_dog/index.html#.VhqOcaGrKA](http://www.thedogdaily.com/conduct/bonding/destress_your_dog/index.html#.VhqOcaGrKA)