

Doggy Ways

Canine Body Language

CALMING SIGNALS:

Calming Signals are used by dogs both to calm themselves, other dogs and even humans whenever they feel anxious or uncomfortable about something.

- **Head Turn and 'Look-away':**
This signal often presents as a swift movement of the eyes and/or head only. Alternatively, the eyes and/or head may turn clearly to the side and be 'held' there for some time. The head-turn or look away effectively makes the dog appear less challenging because it does not make direct eye contact and it therefore often calms the other dog as well. We can also use this signal, for example to avert potentially dangerous situations and we can also condition our dogs to use the signal when meeting other dogs by teaching them the 'Watch' signal.
- **'Turn-Away':**
The Turn-Away has a similar meaning to the Head-Turn and Look-Away, except that in this instance, the dog will turn its side or even back towards whomever they wish to calm. You can use this signal to great effect with dogs showing aggression, fear or that jumps-up.
- **Nose Lick:**
The nose-lick is mostly presented as a very quick movement of the tongue. It is commonly used to indicate that *'no harm is intended'* when approaching another dog.
- **Freeze:**
Presents as a stop, stand, sit or lie absolutely still, and is commonly used when a larger or higher ranking dog approaches too close and begins sniffing.
- **Sit:**
This signal is similar to the 'freeze' above.
- **Play Bow:**
Is primarily used as an invitation to play and is presented by the dog going down on the front legs with his rear in the air. It may also be utilized by dogs attempting to 'make friends' with a strange dog he's not sure about.
- **Curving Approach:**
Polite and well-socialized dogs will usually approach other dogs in a curved, oblique line rather than head-on.
- **Sniffing:**
Is often presented as a swift movement of the nose to the ground and up again. Alternatively, the nose may be held at ground level for some time.
- **Split-Up:**
Commonly used in tense situations and presented by the dog physically going-between two other dogs (or humans). Its aim is to calm antagonists down.
You can use this signal to great effect by stepping in-between your own dog and something he is uncomfortable about –provided, of course, it is safe for you to do so!

AMBIVALENT SIGNALS:

Not all signals are calming signals. Some signals can even have various meanings:

- **Tail-wagging:**
A wagging tail does not necessarily mean your dog is happy! It is always prudent to 'read' the whole dog and look for additional signals and attempt to interpret the 'whole-dog'.
- **Raised Hackles:**
Is often mistaken for aggression although, in fact, this is purely an indication of high arousal, which means the dog is excited or aroused by something. Once again, it is essential to look at the 'whole-dog' in order to interpret this sign.
- **Barking:**
Barking is often associated with aggression but may, in some instances, be associated with various other emotions such as excitement, pain or fear. As with the two previous signals, this signal should be 'read' and interpreted in conjunction with other signals the dog is transmitting.

WARNINGS AND THREATS:

Dogs also use visual and scent signals, postures and even weight distribution to communicate their social status as well as to warn and/or threaten:

- **The 'Agonistic Pucker':**
Careful observation of the corners of the dog's mouth can give you an immense amount of information. Whereas retracted, 'long' lips generally signify 'submission' and appeasement; lips pushed forward mostly indicate offensive intentions. If a dog's lips are pushed forwards, its nose 'crinkled' and the teeth bared, possibly accompanied by snarling or barking, do take extreme care: this is a confident dog that has every intention of following-up on its threats!
- **Direct Stare:**
A direct unflinching or hard, stony stare is principally used by high-ranking dogs. It is mostly used as a warning to 'back-off' but it may also be a direct challenge! Do not stare back, rather turn your head away or turn your side towards the dog and slowly retreat by walking backwards. Do not run or you risk awakening the dog's prey-drive.
- **Raised Head / High Stance / Raised Tail Base:**
Once again an indication that the dog is confident; if combined with other signals, e.g. the direct stare, agonistic pucker and forward weight distribution, you would do best by assuming a calming signal yourself and turn away and very slowly begin to place more distance between yourself and the dog. Once again, do not run!
- **Standing over/Placing a paw or muzzle over:**
This signal is primarily utilized to establish 'status' and indicates that a dog considers himself to be higher ranking than the other dog (or human), and that he expects to be treated as such.

Other signals that may indicate a threat or warning include, for example: Ears drawn forward, growls, snarls and barking.

POSTURES & WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION:

Much can be learned about a dog by observing its posture and weight distribution.

- **'Normal' Posture:**
The dog is alert and its tail-base is relaxed, as are its jaws and eyes. Weight distribution is even over the legs.
- **Confident / High Ranking Posture:**
This individual commonly adopts an upright stance with an even or slightly forward weight distribution. The base of the tail (not necessarily the tip) is carried high and the ears turned forward.
- **Weight Distribution towards the front:**
You can learn a lot about a dog's intentions by watching whether he places his weight onto the front or the hindquarters. If the dog primarily places his weight onto his front legs, it generally indicates that the dog intends to go forward, perhaps to attack, whereas a dog that places his weight onto the hind may be more inclined to flee (provided he has got an escape route!).

- **Offensive / Aggressive Posture:**

The dog commonly exhibits an 'agonistic pucker' (bared teeth, crinkled nose with the lips drawn forward), its weight distribution is towards the front and it may emit a low warning growl. Its tail-base is carried high; its stare direct, challenging, hard and stony, attempting to 'stare-you-down'!

- **Submissive / Low Ranking Posture (Weight distribution to the rear):**

This dog adopts a low body carriage, often accompanied by weight distribution towards the rear (backwards). Its tail is mostly carried low, its ears turned back, along its neck. This posture is often accompanied by a 'submissive grin' (long lips) and half-closed eyes.

This dog will often lie down, roll over slightly and avert its eyes in a friendly gesture, when approached.

- **Defensive Posture (Weight distribution to the rear):**

This dog mostly adopts a low, tense body carriage with weight distribution towards the rear. The ears are usually drawn back along its neck and the dog will often growl and bark, indicating that it is scared and it is basically telling you to stay away. Its tail is mostly rigid, sometimes tucked right up underneath the belly. Its lips are 'long' and drawn back into a frightened 'grin'.