

Understanding Your Dogs Body Language

Jane Marshall: Dog Trainer

Dogs have lived with us for hundreds of years. You have to give them credit for putting up with us that long! Yet, even now, with several billion dollars being spent on our dog's welfare each year, few people are aware of how a dog communicates before they take him home.

Imagine inviting a foreign speaking guest into your house and assuming he should speak your language and understand your routines. We do this with dogs all the time. Would you punish this guest from another culture if he made a social gaff?

Although dogs as a species have been very successful (there are estimated to be 73 million dogs in the US alone) the story for individual dogs is different. 8-10 million of them are surrendered to shelters each year, and almost 5 million dog bites are reported annually. This suggests a less than successful relationship for many dogs and their families.

However, if we can take time to understand how dogs communicate it could help us to interact with them more easily and safely and also enable us to help them navigate the complicated world of humans that we require them to live in. Although dogs do have some verbal communication they have an even larger repertoire of body language to convey their mood.

It is not unusual to read of some unfortunate incident in the newspaper where a dog has bitten someone, the distressed owner claiming it was "out of the blue" or the dog is "unpredictable." Dogs rarely bite without giving a prolonged set of signals to say they are uncomfortable. If you can read the dog's body language you can help him out of difficult situations and avoid putting him in situations in which he may feel threatened.

Even worse than not recognizing the signals dog's send us, is misinterpreting what they are telling us. Who has not heard "he must be friendly, he is wagging his tail", a potentially risky conclusion!

So many of our innocent interactions with dogs can unwittingly convey the wrong message to them. A very normal greeting for us is to lean forward looking someone straight in the eye offering a hand to shake or even a hug. To a dog this type of greeting is very threatening. Dogs are keenly aware of personal space, when two dogs greet they circle around each other politely avoiding eye contact.

If one dog is dominant or wants to threaten the other he will stand tall, walk directly at the other dog using a lot of eye contact. He may even place his head or paw over the neck or back of the other dog. Compare this threatening greeting with how we walk up to a dog to pat him.

Of course our family pets learn that this is how we as humans interact with them and adjust. Most of them, especially when brought up with us from puppies start to really enjoy this type of petting. It is not however, a safe way to approach a dog you do not know.

In Puppy classes we teach the puppies from an early age to enjoy being patted on the head, preparing them for life in the human world! In adult dog classes we identify dogs who are shy of hands and work with them to overcome this.

Most Dog Bite Prevention programs which teach children safety around dogs emphasise not approaching and looming over the dog, but instead letting the dog make the choice to come to you, allowing him to sniff your hand and then gently stroking him under the chin in a non-threatening manner.

Other body signals that dogs use are turning their heads away from things they are afraid of, licking their lips, and yawning to express anxiety.

Sitting and not moving is used by many dogs to convey that they are insecure in a new situation. Numerous calls on the Behavior Hotline are: “my new dog is so stubborn, when I walk him he sits down and refuses to move” Pulling them does not work. A few food treats thrown on the floor usually get these dogs moving until they have gained in confidence!

Insecure dogs, especially young ones will urinate on the floor when you approach them. This is a sign of great respect and submission. If this behavior is punished it gets significantly worse. Dogs never do things “out of spite” or to “get their own back on us” these emotions are not part of their repertoire.

There are also many happy signals that the dog will show us. Very wiggly body language is usually a good sign, look for squinty, “smiley” eyes and a dog choosing to approach you. The friendliest sign would be a dog who drops into a “play bow” with shoulders on the floor and rear end in the air. Get ready to have some fun!

What about the wagging tail? In the friendly dog it will be low and making wide sweeps. If the dog is standing tall staring at you with a tail held high wagging rhythmically like windscreen wipers, this is a dog that is very alert. This dog needs to be treated with caution. He is assessing the situation and will not welcome your approach at this moment.

To bring out the best in our dogs and to keep our families safe, it is worth investing some time to learn a little about what our dogs are silently (and sometimes desperately!) trying to tell us.