

CANINE COMMUNICATION GUIDE

"A dog will not bite when a simple growl will do."

Three Average Body Postures

- Soft Body Language

Think wiggly puppy body language. The tail is low and soft and probably in a soft swooping wag. The ears will generally be neutral or back. The eyes will be soft, maybe even a little squinted.

- Fearful Body Language

The tail is low and possibly tucked. The tail could be straight down in a fast, stressed wag. The ears are generally back and hackles may raise in excited fear. Mouth corners pointed back. (Think submissive smile). The head is usually held low and there may be some crouching. In more severe fear cases, fearful dogs may roll onto their backs in a display of submission. Dogs may also urinate from fear. This is the ultimate 'no fight' communication from a dog. As fear escalates, dogs can move into either flight or fight response. In flight, the dog will be trying to exit in all directions in a panicked manner. You may see this as rapid movement to the end of the leash in all directions. If the dog cannot flight, fight may erupt with aggressive displays of teeth or vocals. If this happens with a fearful dog, as a general rule just letting the dog know he has an 'out' will stop the aggression. For example, never back a fearful dog against the wall or into a corner where he cannot escape.

- Aggressive Body Language

The head will be very high, with ears forward/erect. The corners of the mouth will also be forward. If barking, you can almost see the 'O' formed with the mouth. Aggressive dogs will often lean their entire body weight forward, even standing on their front tip toes to make themselves appear larger. The tail will be erect and usually motionless. Hackles may appear.

Common Communications

Body Slamming – Body Checking

This is the way a dog will tell you 'no' or 'stop' or 'not there'. Body checking is a dog pushing/slapping you with his feet. This can occur in a broad range of circumstances. For instance, while you are sitting in a chair the dog jumps on your arm firmly and then immediately jumps away from you. This is not an act of love – had the dog's motivations been sincere, he would have jumped on you and wanted to continue to be close to you. In more pronounced body checking, the dog will jump with all four feet off the ground and make firm contact to the handler with two or more paws.

Head Flip / Whip

This is a rapid head movement aimed towards whatever is irritating the dog at the time. For example, while petting the dog may head flip to the touching hand if he does not approve of the petting. A head flip is not to be taken lightly, and if the dog should be put in a position where the first head flip is ignored, it can escalate into a head flip with a display of teeth. Generally with a head flip, the rest of the body language will be stiff. During a head flip you can often see the whites of their eyes as they are stiffly and rapidly whipping their head. They often will remain with their head and eyes staring at the irritant.

Shoulder Rub

This is the canine behavior that is most often confused with loving action. Think how a cat rubs himself affectionately on his owners' legs. If a dog does this it is not affection but rather a warning. 'I am confident and I am not afraid to be close to you.'

The Freeze

As implied, dogs will freeze when they are contemplating their next action. Sometimes it's a split second and the dog is onto some other behavior. Sometimes the freeze will last until the object of the freeze modifies its behavior. For example, in resource guarding if the dog feels his resource is threatened, he may freeze, often moving only his eyes to follow whomever (or whatever) he is being threatened by. He will remain in that freeze until the threat has passed. If the threat doesn't pass, this can escalate into display behaviors of snarling, growling, etc.

Other signs of stress:

Lip licking

Panting

Dilating pupils

Widening eyes

Signs of Calming

Soft, squinting eyes (think – oh, that feels so good)

Yawning

A vocalization can mean a variety of things from 'I'm scared' to 'Let's play' to 'That's mine!' Keep in mind to read your dog's body language in addition to hearing the vocals to know what is going on in your dog's mind.

Remember, the more you know and recognize these canine methods of communications, the better relationship you can have with your dog.