

Canine Body Language

Signs of Stress

1. Yawning
2. Penis crowning
3. Sweaty Paws
4. Lip licking
5. Vocalization
6. Dilated pupils
7. Whale eye
8. Dog won't eat
9. Submissive urination
10. Ears pinned back
11. Freezes
12. Pacing
13. Slow or little movement
14. Tucked/low tail
15. Stiff posture
16. Excessive shedding
17. Stretching
18. Trembling
19. Muscle ridges around eyes & mouth
20. Excessive salivation
21. "Check out" - genitals
22. Shallow/fast breathing
23. Look away
24. Paw raises
25. Sniffing
26. Sneezing
27. Scratching
28. Blinking
29. Shaking off

Distance Increasing Signals

1. Marking territory
2. Hard eyes
3. Showing teeth
4. Ears forward
5. Tense body & face
6. Height seeking
7. Lowered head & neck
8. Excessive barking - fast and low



Reading Dog Body Language

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This dog is under extreme stress.

Looking to handler for reassurance.

Ears back and down, pinned flat against neck. Wide open mouth, lips drawn back, rapid respiration.

Center of gravity forward, shoulders lowered, hunched forward. Tail tucked, tension in haunches, probably trembling.

How to greet this dog: Stand sideways, using calming signals - yawn, deep sigh, pick at the floor (imitates sniffing) will help her relax and feel safer.

Avoid stroking and cooing "it's ok, it's alright." Excess adrenalin results in suppressed appetite; the dog will be able to take food when her stress level comes down.

Calming signals, appeasement

Body curved in C-shape

Head lowered and turned away, nose down

Ears lowered but relaxed

Tenseness over eyebrows

Eyes squinted but soft, blinking

Lips soft

Nose, lip lick

Body weight shifted, paw probably raised



This dog is trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. His goal is to diffuse any aggression from approaching person or animal in a totally passive way. By using appropriate body language and calming signals, you could easily let this dog know that you are non-threatening and ease his tension. Don't loom, hover or stare. Get low, turn sideways, use soft eye and quiet voice.

Avoidance - aggressive response likely if approached too quickly or cornered.



Dog is in C-shape, looking away, but head is lifted slightly, pupils dilated in a frozen stare, watching with peripheral vision.

Center of gravity is toward oncoming "threat"

Ears back and lowered, tail low.

Lips are forward and in tense line.

Tenseness over muzzle, whiskers erect.

Tenseness in the haunches.

"Frozen" defense (freeze, fight or flight)

While this dog is not looking for a fight, it is likely that if reached for suddenly, it would react in self defense with a rapid, probably inhibited, series of fast bites.

"La-la-la-la I don't see you."

Note: this dog is not looking to a person for reassurance, he's looking at the wall - trying to be invisible.

Nose up, ears back.

Whale eye stare.

Lips drawn back. (fear)

Flight would be his first choice, but he is cornered by being on leash and against a wall.



This pup has also flattened himself against the wall, this time in a more actively self-defensive posture.

Ears back, whale eye, focused on person holding his leash.

Lips are tight, whiskers forward.

Tail is up, not tucked - he is probably just as stressed but is more confident/aroused than the previous pup.

The previous pup would probably hurt HIMSELF trying to get away, this pup might hurt YOU.



Beware the cornered dog. You must always leave an escape route.



Pup A.

Head is lowered, whale eye, ears back. Backed into corner, lips tight and forward. Shoulders lowered, weight shifted to left, looking for escape route.



Pup B.

Chin up, pupils dilated. Ears back & down, tightness over muzzle, lips forward, whiskers erect. Backed into a corner, legs braced. Direct stare, prepared defend self.

Which is more likely bite?

Both of these pups are stressed, fearful and willing to defend themselves if pressed. Pup B is probably most prepared to bite at this moment.



Similar, and yet so different. Dog at right is telling you with his eyes exactly where he intends to bite.

Response to looming and staring.



A. Direct eye contact -could growl if feels challenged.



B. Big calming signal - appeasing nose lick.

Relaxed, confident and well-socialized.



Lips, ears, facial muscles, eyes are relaxed, respiration normal.

For more information on body language and calming signals, Turrid Rugaas' Calming Signals booklet and video, available through Dogwise!

How to Interpret Your Dog's Body Language, Facial Expressions, and Vocalizations

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Over the centuries wolves evolved an elaborate system of body language, facial expressions, and vocalizations to communicate with each other. Domestic dogs also use this means of communication, and all of these signals are easily understood by other dogs. If you can learn to interpret how your dog is feeling by observing its posture and expression and listening to it, you'll be well on the way to successful communication with your pet and better equipped to solve any behavior problems that arise.

Following are some major canine attitudes and their typical outward manifestations.



AGGRESSIVE

- Ears Forward or back, close to head.
- Eyes Narrow or staring challengingly.
- Mouth/ Teeth Lips open, drawn back to expose teeth bared in a snarl. Possible jaw snapping.
- Body Tense. Upright. Hackles on neck up. Completely Dominant position.
- Tail Straight out from body. Fluffed up.
- Vocalization Snarl. Growl. Loud bark.



ANXIOUS

- Ears Partially back.
- Eyes Slightly narrowed.
- Mouth/ Teeth Mouth closed, or slightly open in a "grin."
- Body Tense. Slightly lowered in a Submissive position.
- Tail Partially lowered.
- Vocalization Low whine or moaning-type bark.



ALERT

- Ears Perked-up. Turning to catch sounds.
- Eyes Open normally or wide.
- Mouth/ Teeth Mouth closed or slightly open with teeth covered.
- Body Normal. Possibly standing on tiptoe. Slightly Dominant position.
- Tail Up. Possibly wagging.
- Vocalization None. Low whine or alarm bark.



CHASE, BEGINNING STAGE

- Ears Perked-up, forward-pointing.
- Eyes Wide open. Very alert.
- Mouth/Teeth Mouth slightly open. Excited panting.
- Body Tense. Crouched low in a predatory position. Legs bent, poised to run.
- Tail Extended straight out from body.
- Vocalization None.



CURIOUS/EAGER/EXCITED

- Ears Perked-up, forward-pointing.
- Eyes Wide open.
- Mouth/Teeth Mouth open, teeth covered. Possible panting.
- Body Normal stance. Possible wiggling, standing on tiptoe, or pacing.
- Tail Up. Wagging.
- Vocalization Excited short barking, whining.



FEARFUL

- Ears Laid back flat and low on head.
- Eyes Narrowed, averted. Possibly rolled back in head, whites showing.
- Mouth/ Teeth Lips drawn back to expose teeth.
- Body Tense. Crouched low in submissive position. Shivering, trembling. Possible secretion from anal scent glands.
- Tail Down between legs.
- Vocalization Low, worried yelp, whine, or growl.



DOMINANT

- Ears Up straight or forward.
- Eyes Wide open, staring.
- Mouth/ Teeth Mouth closed or slightly open.
- Body Very tall posture. Hackles may be up.
- Tail Stiffened and fluffed. Up or straight out from body.
- Vocalization Low, assertive growl or grunt.



FLIGHT, BEGINNING STAGE

- Ears Back.
- Eyes Wide open. Possibly rolled back with whites showing.
- Mouth/Teeth Slightly opened mouth. Possible drooling.
- Body Tense. Shivering. Low, poised to run.
- Tail Low or between legs.
- Vocalization None. Possible yelp or whine.



FRIENDLY

- Ears Perked-up.
- Eyes Wide open. Alert look.
- Mouth/ Teeth Relaxed, possibly slightly open, “smiling” mouth.
- Body Normal posture. Still, or possible wiggling of whole rear end.
- Tail Up or out from body. Wagging.
- Vocalization Whimpering, yapping, or short, high bark.



PLAYFUL/HAPPY

- Ears Perked-up and forward, or relaxed.
- Eyes Wide open. Sparkly/merry-looking.
- Mouth/ Teeth Mouth relaxed and slightly open, teeth covered. Excited panting.
- Body Relaxed, or front end lowered, rear end up in the air, wiggling in a play-bow. Excited bouncing and jumping up and down. Circling around and running forward and back in an invitation to play.
- Tail Wagging vigorously.
- Vocalization Excited barking. Soft play-growling.



GUARDING

- Ears Perked-up. Forward.
- Eyes Wide open, alert.
- Mouth/Teeth Mouth slightly open, teeth bared. Snapping or gnashing of teeth.
- Body Tense. Rigid. Hackles up. Standing very tall in an aggressive or dominant stance.
- Tail Rigid. Held straight out from body. Sometimes fluffed.
- Vocalization loud alert bark. Growl. Snarl.



PREDATORY

- Ears Alert. Held forward or backward to catch sounds.
- Eyes Wide open. Staring, focusing.
- Mouth/ Teeth Mouth closed.
- Body Rigid. Low to ground, ready to spring forward. Quietly sniffing the air.
- Tail Straight and low.
- Vocalization None (so the prey won't be alerted).



SUBORDINATE (SUBMISSIVE)

- Ears Down, flattened against head.
- Eyes Narrowed to slits or wide open, whites showing.
- Mouth/ Teeth Lips pulled way back from teeth in a "grin".
Nuzzling or licking other animal or person on face.
- Body Lowered to ground, front paw raised. Lying on back, belly up. Possible urine leaking/dribbling. Possible emptying of anal scent glands.
- Tail Down, between legs.
- Vocalization None, or low, worried whining. Possible yelping/whimpering in fear.

