



Canine Communication

Dogs communicate primarily through body language. They use their heads, mouths, eyes, ears, body, and tail to give different signals to other dogs and to humans. Dogs are very good at reading body language and social cognition (the ability to detect subtle cues in humans) and can often predict our behavior even when we think we haven't given any indications of what we are about to do. Humans are very verbally oriented and have trouble reading body language, which often leads to miscommunication and frustration between owners and dogs. By carefully observing our dogs, we can become more familiar with their signals and may be able to understand what they are trying to tell us more easily.

Conflict/Appeasement Behaviors and Calming/Stress Signals

Conflict or appeasement behaviors are also known as calming or stress signals. These signals are used by dogs to communicate appeasement (I'm harmless and no threat to you) or uneasiness. When dogs give each other and us these signals, they are trying to communicate, "Please back off a little, you are making me uncomfortable." Conflict behaviors are often used to decrease social tension and aggression in dogs. Many of these behaviors are considered polite communication and are easily interpreted by other dogs and appropriately reacted to. Dogs avoid conflict whenever possible. These behaviors are often witnessed in stressful situations like vet clinics, dog parks, dog-friendly patios at restaurants. When a dog is feeling stressed, they will often try to soothe themselves by doing some of these behaviors, like sniffing the ground, which is naturally calming.

Look for these behaviors in your own dog:

- Yawning
- Lip Licking
- Turning Head Away
- Squinting Eyes
- Sneezing
- Scratching
- Belly Exposure
- Sniffing the ground
- Hackles raised
- Shaking off when not wet

Be kind and patient with your dog. Miscommunication often leads to frustration and is not actually the fault of the dog, who is doing their best to communicate with you. For example, while training, you lean over your dog and say "Sit!" in a commanding tone of voice. Your dog may turn his head away or sniff the ground instead of doing as you ask. Many owners may interpret this as disobedience when really the dog is trying to calm you down and is saying, "You seem upset and I don't understand why, your tone and body language is threatening to me."

If you are interested in studying this subject further, there is a wonderful book written on the subject, by a Norwegian dog trainer, Turid Rugaas, who was the first to identify these signals. The book is titled, On Talking Terms with Dogs.