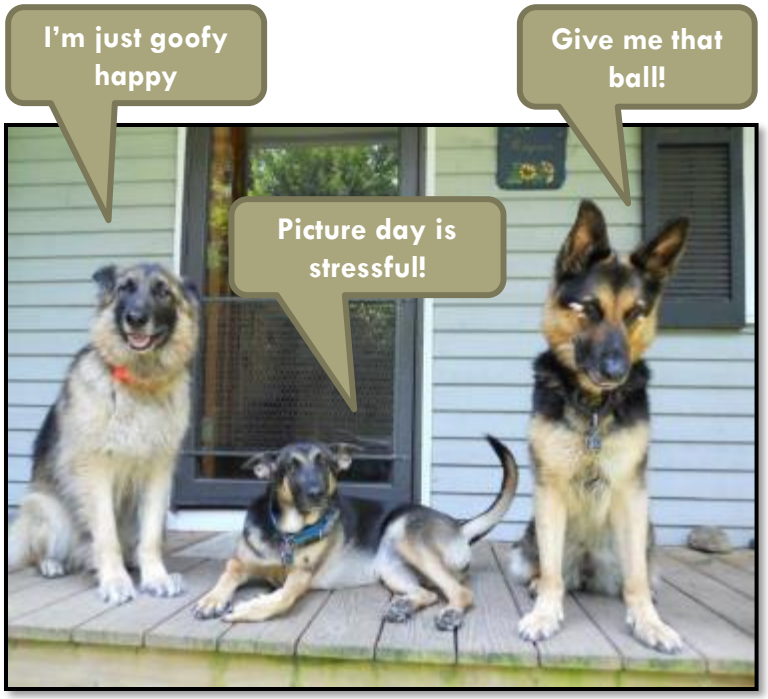
A Dog Communication Primer



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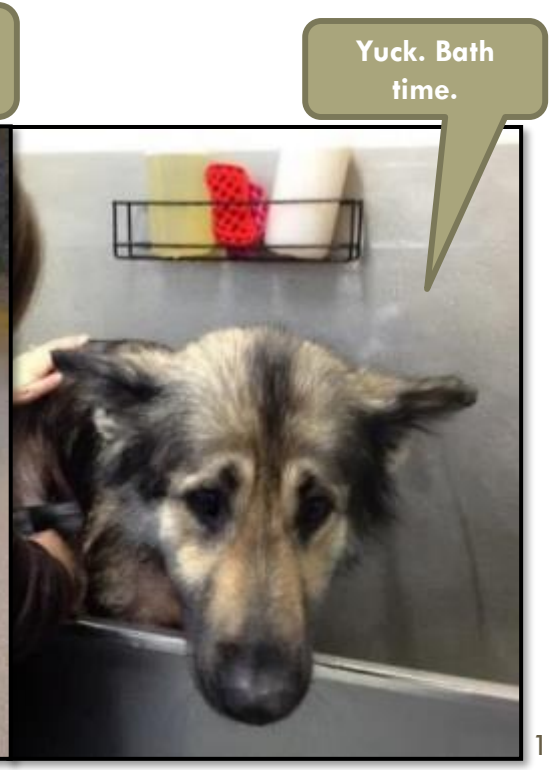

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Benefits

Understanding how dogs communicate with their bodies provides several important benefits—for humans and dogs.

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Communication & Understanding

- Dogs and humans communicate in very different ways.
- Understanding how dogs communicate allows us to better understand how they interpret the world, view us and others, learn, cope, and fit in.
- Dogs can't say "I hate this bath" or "I'm happy being here"…at least not verbally. But, they do tell us with body language and vocalizations.
- Dogs have limited choices for dealing with negative situations
  - Run away (escape and avoid)
  - Shut down (detach emotionally, go to a happy place)
  - Warn and react (growling, biting, attacking—taking action to communicate and then defend themselves)

Does this dog look like he wants to interact?

Don't Ignore (or Punish) a Dog's Communication!

A dog who is walking away, showing body tension, even growling, baring teeth, or snapping is TRYING TO COMMUNICATE. If a dog does these things to us, we may feel angry or afraid—and want to punish such behavior. These feelings are normal, but we don't want to act on them.

Punishing, scolding, intimidating, making the dog obey, or showing such a dog who is boss for these warnings can have devastating consequences. The dog may stop warning (skipping a growl and going straight to a bite). And, such methods do nothing to address the underlying reasons for the dog's behavior; so, even if punitive methods *seem* to work (the dog stops growling when you smack it), all it does is suppress the communication, and in the long run may intensify the underlying issues.

For example, if little Bobby is afraid of the dentist, we probably wouldn't blame the parent for not being authoritative enough or for having a naughty child. And, if that parent told little Bobby to buck-up, and slapped him when he cried, do you think that would make visits to the dentist any easier? Maybe Bobby would become too afraid to issue a peep, but he's certainly going to remain terrified of the dentist. Or, maybe Bobby will have an even bigger meltdown next time he's at the dentist. This isn't very far off from dealing with a dog's negative reactions to whatever may be causing him to growl or show other signals.

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Happy Warm Fuzzies ☺

Relaxed, Happy Body Language

– Tail carriage normal
– Loose sweeping tail wag
– Ear carriage normal, relaxed, or inquisitive
– Mouth open with muzzle relaxed
– Squinty, soft eyes
– Relaxed body stance
– Smile—relaxed jaw, tongue hanging out (but not curved up at the end)
– Alert and engaged but not tense
– Curious and interested
– Doesn't move away from touch
– Willing to engage

Observe your dog when s/he's in his most familiar place and with people s/he likes—what do his/her eyes, tail, ears, face, and body look like?

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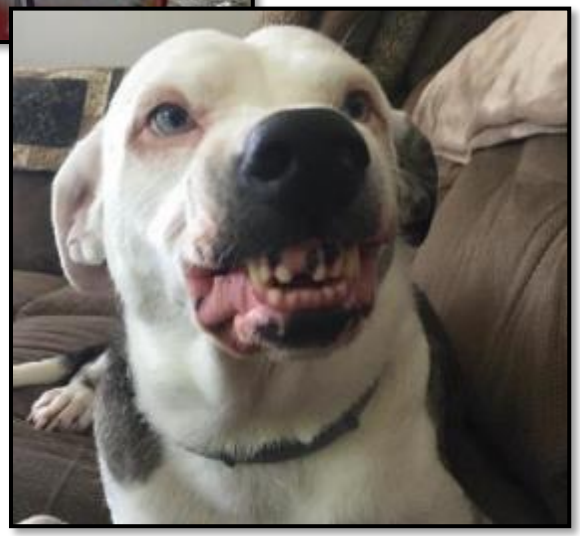
Not Warm & Fuzzy

Some body language is very clear…



Stay away!

Some body language is more subtle…

Lowered ears, worried eyes, muzzle closed

Lip-licking

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Deconstructing Body Language

Dogs communicate (both consciously and unconsciously) for many reasons—to appease, avoid confrontation, express fear, communicate unease or dislike, or to keep someone or something away.

When attempting to understand what a dog may be feeling and thinking, try this three-pronged approach.

1. Observe each part of the dog's body (e.g., ears, tail, mouth);
2. Observe the dog's entire body (if we only look at one body part, we may miss critical information and misinterpret individual body language signals; and
3. Consider the context (i.e., what might the dog be reacting to, what may be new or different in the environment?).

Some of the more common signals that a dog may exhibit when feeling stressed, uncomfortable, fearful, and/or defensive are listed on the next page.

A sweet interaction caught at a farmer's market. While there is nothing concerning in the dog's body language (note the relaxed face, open mouth, tongue hanging out), some dogs may not be as receptive to such direct body language from a little person.

The Dog's Eye View—the Only Viewpoint That Matters

You and your dog are taking a stroll in the woods. As your dog looks ahead, his body grows tense, his eyes are locked onto something; he starts barking furiously.

Reaching for your bear spray, you anticipate a grizzly charge based on your dog's extreme reaction…

A fallen log that wasn't there yesterday juts up from the forest floor—and your dog is furiously communicating—warning you to RUN!

You look at your dog—an animal with finely honed senses and instincts, and you have to laugh. THAT'S what you were afraid of?

Your dog doesn't think it's all that funny—he was still startled and scared by what in his mind was unfamiliar. Your dog's reaction may make no sense to you, but it does to him.

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"I'm Not Comfortable" Indicators

These signals are grouped by purpose, but signals don't always fit into neat categories (ones that commonly bridge two categories are positioned between the two lists below). Signals can carry different meanings based on context, additional body language signals, and other factors. Also be aware that behavior can quickly move from one state to another (for example, avoidance to). If the categories seem confusing or difficult to remember, think of these signals as a dog saying "I'm not comfortable".

Appeasement and/or Displacement

The dog is trying to avoid confrontation, show deference, demonstrate she is not a threat, and/or de-escalate situation.

- Muzzle licking (to another dog or human)
- Jumping up, crawling on, the owner
- Excessive blinking
- Averting the eyes
- Turning face and/or body away
- Rolling over on back (withdrawing from interaction, not seeking attention)

The below are mostly associated with displacement behaviors

- Sneezing
- Pacing
- Sniffing (the ground, other things)
- Licking (people, dogs, itself, objects)
- Scratching
- Playing/play bowing

Stress, Discomfort, Nervousness, Fear

Signs a dog may be experiencing a wide range of uncomfortable situations—from discomfort to outright fear.

Lowered head, ears, and/or body
Tail tucked/low tail carriage
Lifting a paw
Lip licking
Yawning
Shaking off

- Excessive shedding
- Sudden appearance of dandruff
- Wide-eyed/whale eye, shifty eyes
- Rounded back, head lowered
- Inability to eat or take a treat
- Less responsive to cues, difficulty with learning
- Curved tongue (end of tongue is curved upward)
- Panting, shaking, drooling
- Sweaty paws
- Whining
- Body odor
- Diarrhea or vomiting
- Dog tries to make itself look small
- Hiding, shrinking, withdrawing
- Leaning or moving away to avoid

Defensive and/or Offensive

When all other signals have been ignored, the dog has no other choice but to amplify its message. A defensive dog backed into a corner or pushed too far may have no choice but to go on the offensive.

Hackles (piloerection)
Facial tension
Mouth shut
Barking
Hard, direct stares

- Leaning forward
- Direct, forward stance
- Freezing, stillness
- Puckered mouth
- Bared teeth
- Growling
- Air snapping or snapping at
- Nipping (not in play, excitement)
- Stiff, slow movements
- Stiff, upright tail (may be wagging slowly)
- Biting
- Holding breath

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Bodies

Defensive/offensive mode. Notice the forward body posture, stiff tail, the intensity of the stare and the tension in mouth and face. Contrast this with the photo of the dog below.

Don't hurt me…Notice the lowered body posture, as if attempting to make herself look small. Put this together with the paw lift, the ears being down and back, the tension in the face and worried/shifty eyes. Contrast this with the photo of the dog on the right.

Can You Imagine…

You are repeatedly being hurt, teased, or put in frightening situations. You try to tell others, you try asking for help, but you don't have the language to do so, and so no one understands. Nothing changes. One day, you can't take it anymore—and you strike back with a hard punch. Everyone is shocked and punishes you; even worse, they may send you away…you are labeled "violent". Sadly, this is the experience of many dogs.

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Faces

Soft, attentive gaze

Worried ears and eyes

Alert and happy

Frightened, unsure

Avoidance and warning (dog on left)

Relaxed, happy grin, soft squinty eyes

I'm OK

I'm not OK

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Faces

1: Soft, attentive gaze

3: Engaged, inviting

I'm OK

2: Unhappy, uncomfortable

I'm not OK

4: Unsure, a bit tense

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Eyes

Eyes can speak volumes. These photos display eye characteristics that may mean a dog is uncomfortable or stressed—wide eyes, whale eyes, hard and/or fixed stares.

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Double-Duty Signals

Some signals can have more than one meaning. The behaviors below are listed on the prior page as being an "I'm not comfortable" signal. But they are also a few examples of signals that do double duty in terms of meaning—and can easily become lost in translation.

- *Paw lifts* can be a sign of anticipation ("oooh that treat looks good", excitement ("throw the ball!"), or alertness ("I know there's a critter in that bush!).
- A dog may have *hackles* (hair standing up on all or part of it's neck/back) if s/he is surprised/startled, overstimulated, uncertain, or excited (some dogs raise hackles during play).
- When a dog *shakes off*, s/he may be wet. If a dog *yawns*, s/he might simply be tired or content. These signals also help a dog de-stress (think about how calming a deep breath feels to us).
- Several *displacement behaviors*—sneezing, sniffing, scratching—can actually be normal physical reactions. The dog sneezes from an itch in the nose, sniffs because there's a new smell, or scratches because s/he's itchy.
- When a dog *looks or turns away*, he may be telling another dog (or you) that he's done interacting, or that the other dog is being a pest! ("Say it to the hand").

Observing other parts of the dog's body, and considering the context/situation, will help you sort out what a behavior means.

Reward shake-offs and yawns; these are signs your dog is managing his or her stress.

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Show What You Know!

1. Name two body language signals from each category of body language: appeasement, displacement, stress/nervousness, and defensive/offensive.
2. Look at the photo on page 3. What body language do you observe? What do you make of the interaction?
3. What might happen if we punish a dog who growls at us? Why might punishment and other negative reactions not be advisable?
4. Look at the photo on page 6. The dog's tail is up and over its back. Does that mean that the dog must be uncomfortable and/or defensive/aggressive? Why or why not?

ANSWERS:
1. Review page 6 for lists of each.
2. Tail stiff/upright, leaning away from hand, mouth closed, ears pinned back.
3. Review the callout box on page 3. Punishing may cause the dog to give up communicating, may intensify the dog's issues, and does nothing to address the underlying reasons for the dog's reactions.
4. This breed normally carries the tail in this manner; it doesn't necessarily indicate cause for concern. Looking at the rest of the body language (relaxed) supports this assessment.

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What Do You See?

What do you see in each of these photos? Notice the individual pieces of body language, the entire dog's body, and possible context.

ANSWERS at the bottom of the page, numbered to match the photos.

ANSWERS:

1. The open mouth with tongue out gives the false impression of a happy, relaxed dog. However, a tongue curled upward at the end like this one indicates stress. Also notice the tension in the face and the ears pinned back. Compare the tongue, face, and mouth with the two upper photos on page 9.
2. Observe the furrowed brow, ears slightly down and apart, tense/closed mouth. There is a look of concern. Also note context—the bone between the paws.
3. The dog on the left is tentative and worried—note the paw lift, ears down, the rounded back, the lowered tail, and the tension in the face. The other dog has a much different demeaner—open and inviting—notice the open mouth, tongue out, curved body, and soft facial features.

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What Do You See?

Each of these photos displays a paw lift. Should we interpret all of the photos in the same way? Are all of these dogs stressed or uncomfortable?

What do you think each dog is feeling?

Can you name other body language signals that could have different meanings?

ANSWERS at the bottom of the page, numbered to match the photos.

ANSWERS:

No, not all of these dogs are stressed/uncomfortable. If we look at the body language overall and the context, we understand that they are not the same. Dog in photo 1 is lifting paw to solicit attention. Dog in photo 2 is fearful and worried. Dog in photo 3 is anticipating the ball being thrown. Dog in photo 4 is showing deference—due pressure/stress about greeting the stranger in the chair. See page 7 for other dog signals that can carry different meanings.

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What Do You See?

What do you see in each of these photos? Notice the individual pieces of body language, the entire dog's body, and possible context.

ANSWERS at the bottom of the page, numbered to match the photos.

ANSWERS:

1. Note the lowered body posture (especially the head and neck), the paw lift, and closed moth. Dog is not in a home setting, is on leash, and is being asked to approach a human he doesn't know.
2. Note again the lowered head and body, the tension in the face, alert ears. The stance is such that the dog is leaning back away from the object. However, the dog is showing some engagement—sniffing the object that has spooked him. The context is also important—this is not a home setting, and the dog is being asked to approach an unfamiliar object (a fireman's hat that also carries smell of smoke).

Read More About It

Did you like this handout?

Then you might really like our "WOOF! What is the dog saying?" lecture series—given free or at low-cost in communities around VT.

Schedule and locations:

https://www.goldstardog.com/woof/

Recommended sources about body language and dog safety:

- Handelman, Barbara. *Canine Behavior: A Photo Illustrated Handbook*
- Aloff, Brenda. *Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide*
- Rugaas, Turid. *On Talking Terms With Dogs Calming Signals*
- *Doggone Safe:* http://doggonesafe.com/
- *Stop the 77:* http://stopthe77.com/
- *Pet Professional Guild, Canine Advocacy:* https://petprofessionalguild.com/Canine-Advocacy

Access additional information at the special Woof resource page:

www.goldstardog.com/visit-the-library-1

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