CANINE COMMUNICATION

CANINE TRAINING PARTNERS
What is My Dog Saying?
Canine Communication 101
CD version

Shifting weight conveys intent
Carol A. Byrnes, CPDT ~ Diamonds in the Ruff
Communication signals are designed to:

- Create distance.
- Decrease distance.
- Express politeness, show friendliness, resolve conflict.
- Express fear, reluctance or discomfort.
- Express joy!

Rocking horse gait and big smiles – these are happy dogs!
When humans think “body language” we tend to focus on what the ears and tail are saying. We listen for the growl or bark. But these are only a tiny piece of the canine communication ballet.

Dogs speak with their bodies
They communicate through:

- Facial Expression
- Tail & ear carriage
- Posture
- Vocalizations
  Barking, whining, growling, howling

But that’s not all …
The most SUBTLE body language signals carry great meaning.

A dog signals intent and stress level in many ways:

- Weight shift
- Blinking, licking, yawning, sniffing
- Looking – or not looking.
- Pupil dilation
- Corners of mouth
- Posture, tenseness of face/body muscles
- Bend of elbow
- Respiration rate
- Speed and direction of movement

In this presentation you will see examples of:

- An almost imperceptible shift of weight
- Change in breathing
- Tenseness of muscles
- Squinting eyes, blinking

A few ‘words’ in a sentence of dog language.
Thin slicing

"The power of the trained mind to make split second decisions, the ability to think without thinking, in other words using instinct or intuition based on the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and people based on very narrow 'slices' of experience.” – Malcom Gladwell

“Words” of canine communication happen in clusters - “paragraphs” of information like dance moves, flowing from sender to receiver and back.

By focusing in on individual aspects of behavior, we can teach the eye to see the important information and disregard the unimportant.

We’ll start with the most familiar canine communication tool: The Tail!
A tail wag isn’t just a measure of “how friendly” a dog is!

The level, speed and tension give clues to how the dog is feeling:

- High alert
- Fearful
- Neutral
- Ambivalent
- Uncertain
- Excited
- Aroused

and yes --

- Happy
Tucked Tail

What signs of stress do you see?

- ears back
- tail clamped
- back rounded
- stress panting

These dogs may look "sorry" or "guilty" but this is merely an appeasing posture designed to diffuse your aggressive tone or invasive posture.
THE EYES HAVE IT!
Looking -versus- Not Looking

• Eye contact is engaging
  – direct communication between the looker and the lookee.

  Relaxed, squinty eye contact with loose, full body wag is generally friendly interest or an attempt to connect socially.  *Distance decreasing*

  Hard eye contact - a direct unblinking stare with still, forward posture - could be a challenge or a threat.  *Distance increasing*

  A whale-eyed stare can be alarm or a warning of an impending bite – watch for short lips vs. long lips, facial tension, posture, high tail vs. low tail.  *Distance increasing*

• Looking away
  - a cut-off signal, a calming signal, or even a status signal.

  Glancing away briefly during greeting overtures.  *Calming signal / distance decreasing*

  Looking away with chin up, as if looking at something more interesting, can be disinterest -*cut-off signal* or dismissal -*status signal.*

  Averting eyes with head lowered, ears back, blinking, lip licking.  C-shape posture might be discomfort or shyness.  *Stress / calming signal.*
Squinty and soft
Friendly, trusting, engaging

Notice both man and dog have the same expression.
Mouth open, jaw relaxed, eyes soft.

- relaxed
- confident
- open
- friendly
- approachable
Tipped head
curiosity and interest

Eyes and facial muscles soft.

High alert.
Mouth closed.
Ears pricked.
Alert, air scenting.
Interested.
Focused, calm.
Watchful.

Eyes and facial muscles soft.
A direct, straight-on approach with strong eye contact is confrontational.
We know that staring is intimidating.
Note exaggerated look-away.
Hard eye, soft eye, or?

- Hard eye - pupil dilation
- Pupil dilation, whale eye
- Squinty, soft
- Unblinking stare
- Soft, tipped head
- Open & direct
- Tipped head shows friendly interest
- Soft – looking up
- Open & direct
- Hard - pupil dilation, direct stare
Looking away

Calming signal.
Taking a break to calm down. >

Cut-off signal – distance increasing.
< An uncomfortable first meeting.
Brown dog looks away from white dog’s approach. What do you see?
• slow movements and look-away
• tail tuck
• ears back and high on the skull
• sideways posture, heads lowered
• bodies in a C-curve
• paw lift
C-curve look-away
Turning head away from threat

Appeasement / displacement behaviors. Sometimes called “Calming signals”

Submissive, stressed look-away with lip lick.

Head lowered, ears back and low on skull, eyes squinty, blinking, C-shape.
“I am no threat.” “I’m uncomfortable.” “I need space.”
Chin up look-away
a cut-off signal
expresses dismissal, lack of interest.

The canine version.

The human version.

Dogs understand us better when we use their language.
“No, you may not have my sandwich.”

A demonstrative look-away freeze is a cut-off signal.

Withdrawing all attention says to the dog, “I’m not interested.”

If looking away doesn’t work, turning completely away will explain it more clearly.
This girl might intend to say, “I don’t want to play.”

But her body language says otherwise.

What do you see?

Bending elbows
High pitched giggle

The pressure of the hands pushing the dog away increases the dog leaning in.

It’s as good as a hug.
Peace keeping, conflict resolution
Appeasement, Calming signals, Deference

- Curving - “C” in posture or direction of travel
- Looking away frequently (shifting eyes or turning head)
- Turning head away, turning completely away
- Blinking, squinty eyes
- Lip lick
- Yawning
- Sniffing the ground
- Weight shift
- Lowering of head / body
- Slowing of movements

Curving is non-confrontational

They work when people use them, too!
People who understand and use these signals are less likely to be bitten!
Weight shift

• Caution
• Politeness
• Calming Signal
• Play invitation
• Deference
Shift of weight, Lowering head
Signals of politeness

^ Back and to the right

Lowering of head, averting eyes > Tail is level, body is soft

This is deference.

To *defer* is to yield out of respect for or in recognition of another's authority.
A play bow may be a play invitation - perhaps a signal to the other dog that "the fighting postures we are about to assume, aren't real" – or in these examples, to diffuse conflict or ease tension.

Dog at L. - round eyes, flattened ears, worried expression – a calming signal play bow.
Dog at R. – bow/stretch. Perhaps this is an “I respect your space” bow or polite greeting behavior. Many dogs greet their owners this way after an absence.

Sometimes a play bow is a “calming signal”
- a term coined by Turid Rugaas, Norway
An exaggerated look-away - sniffing.
"No time for you, I must have lost my wallet."

Sometimes sniffing is just searching out a smell. But when it is displayed in response to social behavior, it's probably a calming signal, cut-off signal or sign of stress / avoidance.
Sniffing is sometimes mistaken for “blowing the handler off”

An animal who is experiencing frustration or confusion, or is under pressure to perform but lacks confidence, will often perform “species specific” displacement behaviors – coping mechanisms – which may look to the handler like the dog is stubborn, distracted or disinterested.

Feelings of confusion or social pressure often trigger the following response:

- Looking away
- Turning away
- Slowing down
- Curving
- Sniffing
- Scratching
- Shaking off

Unfortunately many confused dogs get corrected for being “stubborn or willful.”
People looming over a sensitive dog exclaim, “Oh, he doesn’t like me!”
What do you see?
How would you adjust your approach given what these dogs are telling you?

LIP LICK
Two mildly stressed dogs – alike, yet different.
Look-away, lip lick

Note the great big calming C-curve of the husky
Sometimes a yawn is just a yawn. Tired dogs yawn at the end of a long day.

But if the yawn is in response to social pressure, it’s probably a calming signal. It is often observed due to anxiousness, indecision, or conflict.

A yawn could be considered an exaggerated lip lick.

Yawning
A measure of stress or conflict.

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Poodle makes a statement, standing over his prize during a keep-away play session with a toy. Pup yawns in response. Note direct stare and closed mouth.
Paw lift

Lifting a paw in response to social approach might be conflict or insecurity – an appeasement signal designed to slow your approach or create space.

Pawing is often a play invitation or social gesture.

It could be to display “I mean you no harm” by deliberately putting itself off balance.

It could be "did you hear that?" In hunting breeds a paw lift is linked to spotting prey.

It depends on the context and what the rest of the body is doing.
Stress pant – lips drawn back

Note round eyes, rapid respiration, pinched ears, trembling, low tail.

A stressed dog also blows coat and dander and sweats through pads of feet. This behavior could be due to fear, anxiety, pain – or impending thunder.
Stress pant vs. non-stressed

Eyes large, facial muscles tense, respiration rapid.

Relaxed. Facial muscles soft, eyes squinty.
The commissure, or corner of the lips, will give you information: whether the dog’s reaction is confident or fearful, offensive or defensive.
Most people interpret this as “I’m going to bite you.” Perhaps more accurately, it would be “Don’t make me use these.”

Confidence - everything is forward, icy calm. Pupils are not dilated. Threat displays such as this are designed to AVOID physical conflict.
Submissive grins

Squinty eyes, ears back, often with side winding body language and low, rapidly wagging tail, sometimes with sneezing and groveling.
Submissive grin vs. snarl

How can you tell the difference?

Hard eye, tense facial muscles, lips and whiskers forward

Squinty, lips back, ears back and low, body soft and low
Hard eye, wrinkles over muzzle, bared teeth
Protracted warning sequence designed to avoid actual contact.

Any dog, pushed too far, can bite.

This dog is not enjoying this “game”!
Hostile exchange.

Corners of mouth forward, puckered lips, tenseness over forehead, whale eye, pupils dilated, lizard-like tongue *flick* rather than lip lick. Rigid stance. Defense on left; offense on right.
There is a whole conversation going on here.

What do you see?

Tail high & tense
Up on toes
Leaning forward
Straight on approach – ears forward
Leaning away
Cheek/shoulder presentation
Paw lift, fast wagging tail
Tight leashes!

What do you see?
The trouble with tight leashes

The tight leashes exaggerate and complicate the meeting.

Notice the difference in the intensity of the greeting in the above photo compared to the one at left.

The leashes are relaxed and so are the dogs.
A tight leash adds overall muscle tension and raises the dog’s posture.

This leads to leash frustration and escalation in bold dogs.

The inability to escape increases feelings of vulnerability.

This increases the likelihood of a defensive outburst in shy dogs.

Rocking back, ears back – he may look fierce, but this dog is afraid!
The safest introductions are side-by-side, not straight on.

Pup at right solicits attention by licking adult dog’s mouth. This can also be a sign of deference. Pups often initiate play by chewing on ears or jowls.
Presentation for Smelling
A polite introduction

- Shoulder & cheek presentation
- Soft, squinty eyes
- Weight shifted away
First name, last name.
Nose to tail is proper greeting etiquette.
Curving, cheek presentation
Avoiding direct eye contact, moving slowly, circling.

< If on leash, handlers must be prepared to circle with the dogs.

Keep leash slack. Stay even with dog’s shoulder.

The higher the tail, the higher the arousal.
Cheek to cheek
What’s wrong with this picture?

The tight leash is drawing the dog on the left into the other dog’s space.

If kept “talking” too long, there could be a defensive explosion and no way for the handler to get the dogs out of the situation safely.

For optimal safety, handler should loosen the leash and quietly move behind dog to a position even with dog’s right shoulder.
ENGAGING PLAY

The classic play bow

Let's party!
Rear higher than front, elbows bent.

The bend in the elbow is an extremely important message.
In healthy play, role reversal is frequent.

- Bekoff & Allen - 1998

He is not pinned down, he fell down of his own accord.
Note curving posture of both dogs.
Submissive posture is offered, not forced.

Dogs fall down, assuming the lower role, voluntarily. If pushed and pinned, they are being bullied, not submissive.
Healthy pack order is maintained through active appeasement and control of resources, not intimidation.

- Leaders don’t become leaders by being bullies.
- Leaders just “are” – they have presence and confidence.
- The leader is the one with the choice. He may choose to share, or not.

Generally it’s the ‘wannabe’ dog, not the top dog, who struts around making the biggest threat displays.
Predatory stalk – herding
You might see this posture in play, right before the ambush!

Low head, lowered body, fixed eye, slow, calculated movements.

Predatory sequence: stalk, chase, capture, kill, dissect, consume.
Herding behavior is an abbreviated sequence – just stalk/chase.
“Throw the ball!”

Object play is based on predatory sequence: stalk, chase, capture, kill, dissect, consume.
Playing by the rules requires:

Good bite inhibition.

Paying attention and responding to how a playmate is feeling … and a certain amount of self-restraint.

How can you tell this is playing and not fighting?

Play bow, loose level tail

Limp soft bodies, c-shape
Dropping into a sudden down or sit in the middle of a rousing play session is a cut-off signal.

They were running full speed when she spun and dropped, effectively ending the chase. Notice the Shepherd’s hackles up over his shoulders, high tail, direct stare and tight lips. Belgian’s lips are drawn back, ears back – he’s too much for her and she told him so.
Sometimes play can get carried away.

- Wide open eyes, pupil dilation
- Sideways look - "whale eye"
- Teeth bared, commissure forward

Arousal levels rising – time for a time-out?

**ESCALATION**

- Wide open eyes, pupil dilation
- Sideways look - "whale eye"
- Teeth bared, commissure forward

Sometimes play can get carried away.
THE STRESS ESCALATION LADDER

- Turid Rugaas

Extreme levels of stress
Dog is forced to take action.

Preparation to take action.

Low levels of stress
Communication efforts to lower stress levels & perceived aggressive behaviors in others.

Calming signals:
- Yawning
- Lip licking
- Looking away
- Turning away
- Moving slowly

Displacement behaviors:
- Sniffing the ground
- Scratching

STRESS REACTIONS:
- Panting
- Pupil dilation
- Shaking off adrenaline
- Sweating paws
- Trembling / shaking
- Whale eye
- Hackling

FOCUS:
Loss of calming signals
Close mouth - Freeze

Preparing to defend:
- Showing teeth
- Growling
- Flight / withdrawal

BITE!

LUNGE
The biggest pre-bite warning a dog will issue: **The Freeze.**

If the dog’s mouth is open and it closes.
If a dog is panting and stops.
If his tail is wagging and it stops.
If he was moving and he suddenly becomes a statue …

**PAY ATTENTION!**
The freeze.

A freeze can happen in the blink of an eye. Or the dog may go eerily still and make the hair rise on the back of your neck.

When in a state of arousal a dog goes still, even for a split second, consider it a warning.

Be aware of where he is looking.

That is where he will bite you if he decides to bite.
Space invasion

A challenge – too close for comfort.
Shadowing
Social harassment
There is a different intensity and intent from the tag-along mirroring of one dog simply following another.

Controlling space - Controlling movement
Keeping peace in the pack - SPLITTING

Stepping in. Running interference when an interaction becomes too intense.

< Considering splitting up.

Stepping in to calm down too-rough play.

The other dogs respond by lowering their bodies, lip licking, looking away.
Splitting up is often misunderstood.

Often mistaken for "jealousy" or "protecting" - splitting up is a peace-keeping action, designed to slow things down and create space when things get too close or might topple over into a fight.

- A dog might step between hugging humans just to be included in a friendly moment, or to split up an action that feels too intense or might be dangerous.

- A similar action sometimes mistaken for jealousy or protection is actually resource guarding. A dog might step in between hugging humans to display ownership.

- There can be over zealous splitting. Many herding breeds are hall monitors who feel it necessary to stop all interaction, conflicted or not.

Look at the context and intent.
Handlers can use splitting to avoid confrontation by moving in a curve and putting their body between their dog and a distraction or possible confrontation.

Another type of splitting is Body Blocking.

By controlling the space, speed and direction of travel between dogs, you can control the situation.
Dogs use body blocking –

It could be a person or a thing that creates separation and safety.

^ This handler uses body blocking to give his pup a bit of relief from the invasive pup’s advances.
Many overly-friendly, over-stimulated dogs rush in too fast and too close, ignore subtle warnings to mind their manners, and get decked for it.
Children do the same thing, with the same results.

This is why most bites to children are to the face.

A dog will correct a puppy with an open mouth muzzle pin, inflicting little or no pressure, just lots of noise and spit – an attempt to educate a space invasive youngster, not harm her.
Human space invasion: HUGGING.

Dogs don’t appreciate hugs from strangers any more than you do. Dogs must learn to be comfortable accepting physical restraint. To us a hug is affection. To them, a threatening gesture.

This dog adores this boy. But at this moment, is he really enjoying this hug, or merely tolerating it?
Dominance move: Chin on shoulder

- An assertive challenge.
- A signal of intention to mount.

True “dominance” in the canine world has to do with courtship & breeding rights not pack leadership.

Does a hug feel the same?
Uncomfortable closeness.
Over-loving and unrealistic expectations are often the biggest stress on the child-dog relationship. A little bit goes a long way.
A loom is a threat in dog language. It triggers an innate self-preservation response. It feels predatory and dangerous.

Imagine the dog is your human child and this man is a stranger in a park.

Why do we expect our dogs to welcome the invasive approach of strangers?

Pup looks off in the distance, pretending the man isn’t there. A cut-off signal.
A stand-over stare elicits appeasing behavior.

The boxer responds with squinty eyes, ears back, tail tucked, open hind leg, and lowered shoulders. Appeasement signals placate the assertive approach of the other dog.

This is not “guilt”!

The boxer responds with squinty eyes, ears back, tail tucked, open hind leg, and lowered shoulders. Appeasement signals placate the assertive approach of the other dog.
Her voice may say, “Come!”

But her body language says, “Stay where you are, I’m dangerous.”

- Leaning forward, staring, reaching
- Predatory stance contradicts the invitation to come closer.
- If the dog comes, she will probably come slowly on a curve.
- Dogs who circle just out of reach are not saying, “neener, neener, can’t catch me!” They are conflicted—they want to come, but your body language creates a buffer, repelling them away.
Human greeting: looming and reaching

This is how most people greet dogs. If dogs could change one thing about us, this would probably be it.

Leaning over and looming is a threatening gesture, even if you don’t mean it to be.
Sit for petting

Dog positions *herself* at side and leans in.

In second clip person has stepped to face front.

^ oblique angle vs. facing & hovering >

Note: increased calming signals, weight shift, raising & lowering of head, avoidance & shake off
Comfortable? Uncomfortable?

Relaxed, open mouth.  Squinty appeasing.  Closed mouth, tense.

Weight is forward in dogs one and two.  Weight is shifted back in dog three.

What could you do to make this greeting more comfortable for these dogs?
Just because she didn’t growl or run away, doesn’t mean she welcomed your looming, reaching, in-your-face greeting. It only means she tolerated it.

The next time you hover over a dog to pet it over the head and shoulders, pay attention to what the dog says in return.

How does this dog feel?

This dog is not comfortable.

- eyes large and round
- lips are tight and pulled back
- ears are back and low on her skull

Just because she didn’t growl or run away, doesn’t mean she welcomed your looming, reaching, in-your-face greeting. It only means she tolerated it.
**Weight shift back** — Wary, cautious, fearful.

What body language signals do you see?
What can you do to make this dog feel better?

- Rear quarters crouched
- Eyes hard, whites showing
- Ears forward, but dropped to sides
- Mouth closed, lips tight.

Squat, turn sideways.
Let him come to you when ready.
Always leave room for escape.

Never reach for a cornered dog!
Humans assume this same posture when greeting an unfamiliar dog, when attaching a leash, or when hugging and kissing our dogs on the head. Force-trainers do it when pushing an untrained dog into a down.

Paw on shoulder – loom. A threat in dog language.
Shoulders square, facing, reaching elicits appeasement

Groveling on approach doesn’t automatically mean “abused” – more often, it’s just a sensitive or under-socialized dog, not a mistreated one.

Excitement or submissive urination are triggered by this greeting posture.
Proper greeting

Relaxed, friendly eye contact.
Human's body weight shifted away, inviting puppy in.
The tiniest shift in weight or physical orientation can make a huge difference.
Proper human-dog greeting posture

Side by side, cheek to cheek, soft squinty eyes.
Head tipped, body leaning to the side, soft, squinty eyes.

Dog responds with trusting eye contact, gentle facial expression.

Note the change in expression when she squares her shoulders and leans forward.
Teach your dog to expect and accept the invasive actions of silly human beings.

Socialize, socialize, socialize.

Make sure your new puppy meets and has rich and novel positive experiences.

Groom touch and handle every day.

Gently introduce looming, kissing, hugging and snuggling so it becomes an enjoyable part of your relationship.

Your dog won’t be as alarmed about the odd things strangers do if they are “normal” to everyday life.

His threshold and tolerance will go up and so will his safety with visitors.
Dogs struggle to understand humans as much as most humans struggle to understand dogs.

• We stand on two legs, loom, stare and show our teeth to be friendly like the primates that we are. We cut off polite and proper canine introductions – “first name / last name” - nose to tail!

• We use aggressive and intimidating postures as friendly gestures: straight on / too fast approach, reaching over to put “paws” on shoulders, “mounting” (hugging).

• Well-socialized dogs with a rich experience base have a better chance of learning what we bumbling humans really mean.

• Humans with a little “canine body language education” will find it easier to communicate safely and make friends with cautious or defensive dogs and find it easier to train their own dogs.

• Children who are taught to understand dog body language and to respect a dog’s personal space will be less likely to be bitten.
We ‘speak dog’ so poorly most of the time. How lucky for us, they forgive our clumsy attempts to communicate!
Summary

• Body language is universal – you are talking, too!

• Context is key – sometimes a yawn is just a yawn.

• Both parties are talking. Pay attention to both sides of the conversation!
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