

Dog-Speak

Recognizing Stress Signals

Dogs “talk” to us all the time—but what are they saying? Though dogs certainly bark, they primarily communicate through non-verbal signals that are often fleeting and hard to catch. Noticing and accurately interpreting dog body language is key to understanding how a dog feels and what he is trying to communicate.

Start by observing. It takes practice to become good at spotting more subtle canine body language and lower-level signs of stress. Look often at the details of every body part from the mouth to the tip of the tail. What does your dog look like when relaxed? How does that change when he is happy or excited? Anxious or scared? Conflicted? Ready to play? Not interested in petting? Tired? Hungry?

Below is a list of lower-level stress signals that people commonly miss or misunderstand. If you see one, your dog may need your help. Becoming adept at reading dogs will guide you toward better decisions that keep your dog safe and happy, and help you stop trouble before it starts.



Mouth closed tight



Eyes unusually round



Ears tip backward



Tail points downward



Head/body turn away



Back round, head low



Yawning (not tired)



Whites of eyes show



Ears drop down, back



Tail tucks under body



Avoids eye contact



Whole body tense

CHALLENGE: Select one of the signals above and watch for it in different situations. Are you surprised at when you see it or how often it occurs? Can you change the situation next time to reduce your dog’s stress or prevent it altogether?



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