

An Introduction to Canine Communication

A dog will use body language as their primary source of communication. They can communicate a countless range of information with other dogs and with us through body movement and posture, facial expressions, ear and tail movement and position, and general physical interaction.

Vocal communication is the secondary source a dog will use to express how they are feeling. Barking, yipping, whining, chuffing, howling, and growling are just some examples. Vocal expressions may not always be used during communication.

Why is canine communication important?

Canine body language provides us and the dog with multiple benefits.

It provides us with valuable information. This information can help us understand how the dog may be feeling, adjust our approach, pace, and sometimes the environment in order to set the dog up for success.

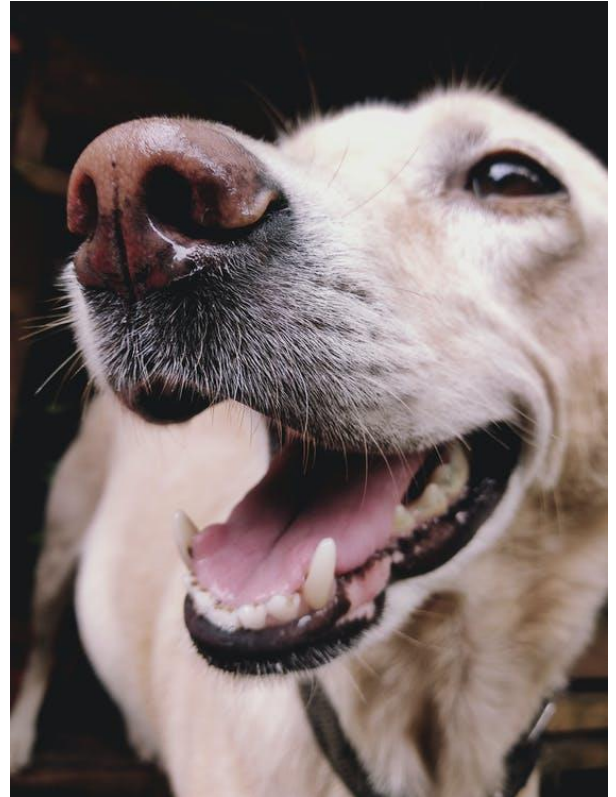
As we learn to effectively identify canine body language, it can help to keep us safe. When we learn what signals a dog might use to tell us that they are scared, uncomfortable or feeling threatened, it provides us with the opportunity to change the way we are interacting with them, which may prevent them from feeling like they have to escalate in order to get their message across.

A dog who doesn't feel the need to escalate in order to communicate is a dog who has options. Below we will overview the Canine Ladder of Aggression to explore further what this means. Being able to respond appropriately with our own body language communicates to the dog that we are "listening". This is an important factor when building trust with a dog, and can help to improve their emotional, mental and physical welfare.

What can it tell us?

A dog can communicate how they may be feeling at any given time by using body language. A few of the things that canine body language can communicate are comfort, playfulness, agitation, focus, stress, aversion, uncertainty, confidence, conflict avoidance, interest, fear, and excitement.

Canine body language can give us clues as to what the dog may do next, allowing us to anticipate, possibly prevent, or manage certain responses from the dog. We can do this by observing the dog and making appropriate decisions.



What to look for

A wagging tail doesn't always mean a happy dog. Factors such as context, environment, generalization, different body parts of a dog, multiple or conflicting body language signals, and breed-specific physical characteristics all play significant roles in how we see what we are looking at.

Often times we will find multiple or conflicting communication signals. Through practice, we will be able to see the bigger picture as we put together pieces of the puzzle. Body language can also transition from certain typical signals or behaviours to another, causing escalation or de-escalation.

The physical characteristics of different breeds may not be as easy to read from one dog to the next due to variances in coat type and length, tail length and shape, face shape, ear shape and direction, and physical build. For example, some dogs have naturally protruding eyes, very short snouts (brachycephalic), wrinkly skin around their brows, erect ears, or a low loping gait. Considering context and environment is always essential, however it can be extra helpful in these cases.

Consistent language and objectivity are important to remember. This helps us avoid labels and varying interpretations of emotion. For example, an objective way to say "that dog is angry and scary when new people come over" might be "that dog shows her teeth, growls, and lunges towards new people come over".

Learning any new language or skill takes practice. Be patient and remember that the dogs are our teachers!

Context

Remember that it is important to look at the bigger picture. When we look at this first picture, we see "whale eye", a tight wrinkled nose, and long pulled back lips that are exposing teeth and gums. We can now see that the picture on the bottom is a cropped section of this full image. The dog is jumping into water after a tennis ball. The bigger picture provides us with information about the environment she is in and how it has influenced her physical appearance (the force of the water and her momentum has caused her lips and eyes to be pulled back in an exaggerated manner).



We may not always have information regarding context. This is why using objective language is key when describing what we are observing. For example, instead of saying that the picture on the bottom left shows an "angry aggressive dog", describing what we do know, being the displayed physical body language, prevents us from assuming or jumping to conclusions that may not be accurate.



Body Parts

Different areas on the body contribute to telling us what a dog might be feeling. Arriving at a conclusion by relying on one or two body parts may be unclear if a breed-specific physical characteristic makes it difficult to identify what you're looking at, or if we are not taking context into consideration. For example, some breeds of dogs have naturally high-held tails that curve over the back, docked tails, long floppy ears, or naturally protruding eyes. Other breeds have long coats that make it challenging to identify if their hackles are raised.

Senior dogs or dogs with medical issues may not move in a typical manner. For example, a senior dog or a dog that has a hip complication may have difficulty balancing or experience pain while walking, causing their posture, gait and ease or speed of motion, and tail movement and positioning amongst other things to vary greatly. Now let's take a look at some body parts and what they are telling us!

Eyes:

- **Soft eyes:** soft eyes appear as if the dog is "squinting". The muscles around the eyes are usually relaxed but may be tight. Keep in mind the context and environment, and that sunny conditions may cause squinting or "soft" eyes.
- **Hard or furrowed brow:** furrowed brows are the tensing of muscles around the forehead. The brow and head-space between the ears wrinkle, pulling the ears up and towards each other. This can also give the appearance of "hard" or intense eyes. Prolonged periods with minimal blinking may be observed.
- **Whale eye:** whale eye is when the white part of the dog's eye, or "sclera", is visible. This happens when the eyes of the dog are very wide, and/or when the head is stationary and the dog is looking in a different direction than they are facing.

Mouth:

- **Open mouth:** an open or panting mouth may communicate a variety of things. A loose lolling tongue, or a soft wide mouth will appear different from a slightly open tense mouth. Different intensities of panting will also affect the levels of tension in the lips and cheeks. Yawning may be a form of communication, or may occur when a dog is waking up from being asleep.
- **Closed mouth:** a closed or tense mouth may communicate a variety of different things as well. Lip licking is most often a form of canine body language, but can also occur after a dog has been eating or drinking. In the top right hand picture, we can see an example of "short" mouth or lips. The dog's mouth is tense and drawn forward with a puckered appearance. In the bottom right hand picture, we can see an example of "long" or mouth or lips. The dogs mouth is tense and the corners are drawn back towards the ears.
- **Lip lifting:** lip lifting occurs when a dog lifts their upper lips, exposing their teeth, gums, and tongue. Sometimes this is accompanied by lip licking. The dogs jaw may be mostly shut, or slightly open to varying degrees. The top of the snout will have a tight, wrinkled appearance.

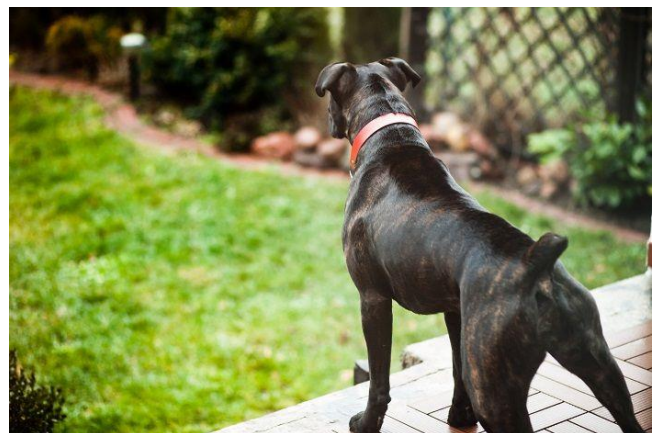


Ears:

- **Loose or soft ears:** loose or soft ears may appear in a variety of positions depending on the shape of the dog's ears. There is no tension in the muscles at the base of the ear, giving a "floppy" or relaxed appearance.
- **Erect ears:** erect ears appear when the muscles at the base of the ear get tense. Often, erect ears will be facing forward, but may also face out towards the side, or slightly towards the back. In the top middle top picture, we can see an example of erect ears that are pointing in different directions, independently of each other. This is referred to as "pivoting" ears. In the bottom middle picture, we can see a dog with floppy or downward hanging type ears that are in an erect position.
- **Pinned, low, or back ears:** ears that are lowered or pulled backwards may also pivot independently of each other. Lowered or pulled back ears may have a looser or softer appearance, like that in the picture on the top left hand, or more of a tense, pinned back appearance, like that in the picture on the bottom right hand. Tense pinned ears will likely affect the muscles around the brow and eyes, thus influencing their appearance as well.

Tail:

- **Energetic tail:** a tail that is high or erect may stand at a 90, or even a 45-degree angle from, or over the back line of the dog. The tail will likely be still, or have minimal movement in the form of slight trembling, a tight "rattlesnake" type movement at the tip, erratic "helicopter" type movement, or a slow measured sweep, sometimes with intermittent pausing. In general, identifying where the origin of motion is when looking at a tail can be a helpful indicator for interpreting canine body language.
- **Neutral tail:** a neutral tail has several ranges of position. A neutral tail may hover slightly above the back line of the dog, point flat out at the same level as the back line of the dog, or hang slightly below the back line of the dog. A neutral tail that is slightly below or above the back line of the dog may also be still, stiff, and/or slightly jut out at the base before sloping, or have minimal movement in the form of a slow measured sweep, sometimes with intermittent pausing, loose or tight erratic "helicopter" type movement, or wide loose wagging in which the whole hind end of the dog moves along as well, affectionately referred to as the "wobble bum"! A neutral tail that is pointing flat out at the same level as the back line of the dog, will likely be tense and stiff, may tremble slightly, or suddenly burst into movement.
- **Low or tucked tail:** low or tucked tail is carried low from the back line of the dog, vertically along the back legs pointing towards the ground, or tucked between the back legs to varying degrees, sometimes even touching the underside of the stomach or ribcage of the dog. A low or tucked tail may be stiff and tense, or sometimes have a tight "rattlesnake" type movement at the tip. These tail positions may also affect the general posture of the dog. For example, refer to the lowered curved back line and haunches, and slightly bent hocks.
- **Hackles:** or "piloerection", are the equivalent of what we refer to as goosebumps in people. It is an involuntary reflex that causes the hair shaft to stand erect. Hackles can occur in a variety of contexts, including but not limited to arousal, excitement, fear, focus and drive, anxiety, during play, anticipation, tension, and aggression. Hackles appear most commonly at the base of the skull, along the back of the neck, top and sides of the shoulders, back line, rump, and along sections or the full length of a dog's tail.



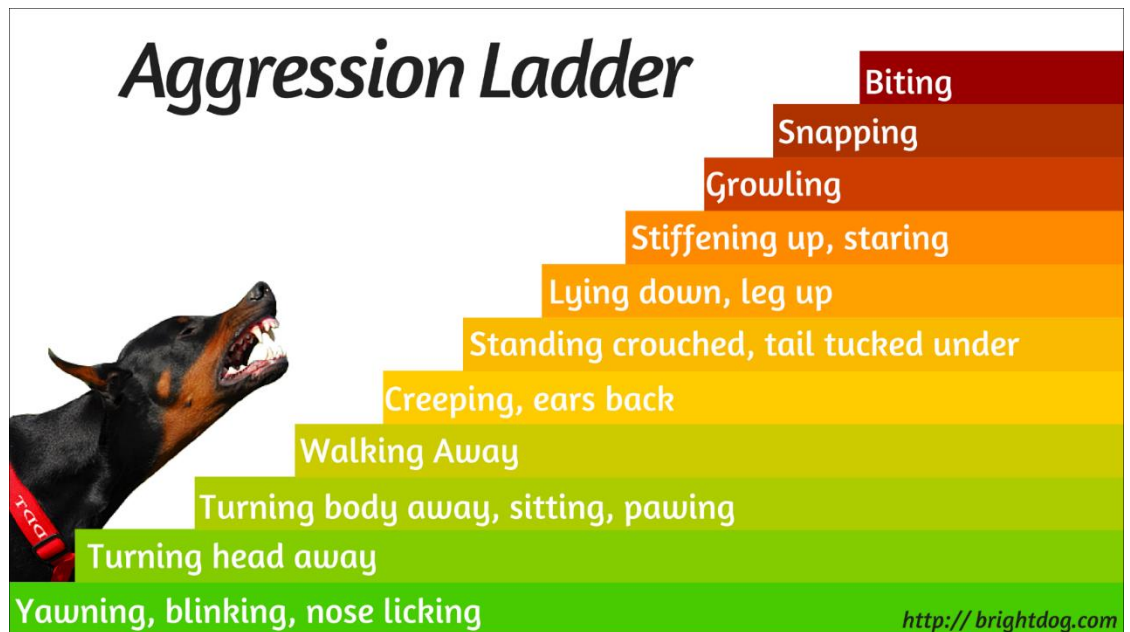
Body Position and Posture:

- Easy or loose: dogs with an easy or loose posture may be found in various positions. Standing, sitting, laying down, leaning, stretching, or a combination of any of these. Muscles in the body are soft and relaxed. A dog in an easy or loose standing, sitting, or laying down position may be leaning or rolled onto their hip or side. Stretching and bowing may also be considered easy or loose postures depending on context. Easy or loose positions and posture may be dynamic or static, and breathing with either an open or closed mouth will be calm and steady. A single deep sigh may also accompany easy or loose postures and positions.
- Tense, focused or stiff: tense, focused or stiff postures can also be displayed in a variety of positions including standing, sitting, laying down, and bowing. Muscles in the body will appear rigid and may tremble. Tense or stiff positions and posture may be dynamic or static, and breathing is likely to be measured, shallow, held, or intermittent. Depending on context, the frame of the dog's body may be leaning slightly forwards, slightly backwards, or tall and square.
- "Wet-dog shake": this action resembles the full body shake a dog does to remove water from their coat after a swim, a bath, or a walk in the rain, however in this context, no water is involved. The "wet-dog shake" is a way for a dog to release stress, and may be observed prior to, during, or following a variety of tense or stiff postures and positions.
- Tense, lower or crouched: a dog in a tense lowered or crouched position may be standing, sitting, or laying down. Muscles will appear rigid and may tremble. Often times, these positions and postures will be static or minimal in movement, with intermittent mid-motion pausing. A dog in a tense lowered, or crouched position or posture may have a slightly forwards or slightly backwards leaning frame. Turning away of the head and or body, as well as paw lifting may be observed.

Canine ladder of aggression

Now, let's consider the examples of canine body language we learned about above and apply them to the Canine Ladder of Aggression.

Here we can see the progression of types of body language a dog may show us when they are uncomfortable. It is important to note that many of these signals can be very subtle and happen very quickly, sometimes within the blink of an eye! Another important factor to consider is that some dogs may begin with yawning and nose or lip licking, but skip to walking away, or stiffening up and staring. They may not communicate all of the steps in between. This is why practice and careful observation are essential.



Five categories of canine body language

The five basic categories of canine body language are:

1. Aggressive
2. Fearful
3. Anxious
4. Aroused
5. Relaxed

As we become familiar with the five basic categories shown here, think of a traffic light. Green means go. Yellow means slow down. Depending on the category, this indicates that we need to slow or change our approach. Red means stop. Depending on the category, this indicates we need to slow, change, or entirely stop our approach.

Keep in mind that these categories provide general guidelines for what we are looking at. It is important to use consistent language and make objective observations when we are interacting with our dogs. Remember that transitions can happen on a “spectrum” within or between categories. An active fearful dog may escalate into defensive aggression. A dog in a state of alert arousal may escalate into offensive aggression. If you are having difficulty with your dog escalating, please contact our Certified Trainers at to set up a Problem Solving and Behaviour Modification Consultation.

The Human Approach

Every dog is different. Some dogs may immediately show interest in visitors or their handler, whereas others may take more time to come out of their shell.

A calm and considerate approach is appropriate when approaching any dog, even if they are calm and relaxed. This type of approach communicates to the dog that you are composed and predictable. This approach also allows for optimal focus and observation on your part as a handler.

- Being mindful of our own body language can make a significant difference in how a dog perceives us. Presenting the side of our body instead of the front of our body is a polite gesture in “dog language”. It can diffuse confrontation, ease shyness or fear, and invite social interaction
- Avoid prolonged or provocative eye contact. This can sometimes be perceived as threatening to dogs. Softening your eyes or turning your face/looking slightly away from the dog can soften social tension
- Allow the dog to approach you. This communicates clearly to the dog that you are being mindful of her space and emotional state, and can help to build confidence and trust
- Bending, standing, or reaching over a dog can be perceived as threatening. For smaller dogs, kneeling down may sometimes be appropriate
- Keep in mind that “approach” may not always necessarily be referring to “moving towards”, but may also be the process of assessing the body language of the dog and deciding what the next appropriate action will be. Sometimes your “approach” may be to let the dog come to you while simply staying stationary
- Observational skills are incredibly important when interacting with a dog. Remember that changes in context and environment can influence the emotional state of the dog. This may cause their body language signals to change or transition, sometimes within the blink of an eye!
- Always be aware of your surroundings. Be mindful of where other people, dogs, animals, and traffic are located around you. This will allow you to adapt efficiently to any sudden changes or surprises while keeping everyone involved safe.

