

CANINE COMMUNICATION

Canine communication involves a lot of subtle gestures and signals. When we interact with dogs we need to observe what they are trying to say. Noticing signs of stress early can avoid many problems. But remember – always think about the context, these signs are part of the overall situation – it depends!

Signals

Turning head – this can be done when being approached or when the dog is worried, it helps to avoid eye contact and can very often relieve tension in a situation.

Avoiding eye contact – again this is used by dogs to avoid confrontation or diffuse a hostile situation

Turning away – turning to the side or back can be calming. Dogs at play often begin by turning their side or back to the other dog, this can denote that they are friendly and wish to play. It can also be used as a break in boisterous play

Licking lips or nose – this is often a sign that the dog is worried or stressed. Or perhaps he's just ready for his dinner!

Freezing – dogs show this signal when they are being sniffed at by other dogs, especially dogs which are larger than themselves. Movement could cause a reaction so the complete stillness and avoidance of eye contact will very often diffuse or prevent aggression.

Using slow movements – dogs may use this when they see another dog, or if you call them back angrily – they move slower than normal on purpose to avoid the confrontation or slow things down a little. This action usually demonstrates that the dog is under stress.

Play bow – is usually an invitation to play and have a good time. Dogs can use this when they meet – it is their way of saying "I'm harmless, let's play". This type of signal is also very often a precursor to sexual behaviour.

Sitting down – can be a signal of a dog being uncertain of you, another dog, or the situation the dog finds itself in. Asking your dog to sit is an excellent way of diffusing a stressful situation when a dog is under stress – if he knows the cue!

Lying down, stomach showing – is a signal of non-threat, or sometimes to evade something he doesn't want to do

Lying down on stomach – is a calming act and is very often used by confident dogs to calm situations and let the other dog know they have no reason to be worried.

Yawning – dogs often yawn when under stress. Some people think we should yawn at our dogs when the situation is tense – it may help them to relax.

Sniffing – dogs may use this signal when being approached by another dog, their owner or the situation. They will suddenly start to sniff the ground, again it acts as to diffuse potentially tense or difficult situations along with the avoidance of eye contact and also to provide a calming break in boisterous play.

Tail wagging – IS NOT always a sign of pleasure or happiness. It could be a sign of a white flag or of potential aggressive intent. Tail carriage is very important when understanding the dog's intentions. For example: A low swishing tail is usually related to relaxation and happiness. A high, stiff tail with rapid tail wag is a sign of arousal and potential reactivity.

VOCAL COMMUNICATION

A dog uses vocal communication far less than a human does, although there is a huge range of vocal sounds in a dog's vocabulary, all meaning different things, and are an indication of mood and temperament. Below is a description of the range of vocabulary a dog exhibits and what they mean

Barking

Barking is the equivalent of human conversation. It's a great way of attracting the attention of another dog or human, it also announces a dog's intention and very often helps relieve stress. Different barks mean different things:

- A series of high pitched barks means the dog is worried and wants attention
- A single bark in the dog's regular voice means that it is curious about a particular person or situation and wants to make contact
- Quick repetitive high-pitched barks means that your dog has very often spotted something and wants to play or chase
- A low repetitive bark – the sort the dog makes when a stranger approaches – means that the dog is feeling defensive or threatened

Growling

Growling is an unmistakable warning sign, dogs use it to tell other dogs and humans to back off. Dogs very often growl when they are frightened.

- When the dog combines a growl with a posture of intent the dog intends to be aggressive
- When a dog combines a growl with a submissive posture the dog may attack from fear or to defend itself
- A growl during play between dogs or with humans has no aggressive intent at all.

Howling

Howling is a dog's equivalent of using the phone, it is how the dog communicates with dogs in other territories, even when they are a great distance

- A sing-song howl is used to contact other dogs and means that the dog is curious or happy
- A plaintive, mournful howl signals the dog is in distress

Whining or whimpering

This vocal range communicates that the dog is fearful or under stress

- When a dog is excited or lonely, the dog will whine or whimper for your attention, this can sound like yawning
- When a dog is stressed, fearful, wounded or worried, it will give repetitive whines that may be punctuated with shrill yaps