

Canine Communication: Reading Body Language

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Introduction

Canine communication utilizes an array of senses including olfactory, auditory and visual cues. Pheromones, glandular secretions, barks, whines, yips, growls, various body postures, etc., all serve as effective means of communication between dogs. Unlike in people, canine body postures and olfactory cues are the most significant components of dog language whereas vocal communications are the less significant. Canine communication through the use of characteristic body posturing is reflective of emotional states, not necessarily specific intent. Domestic dogs are unusually skilled at reading human social and communicative behaviour – even more so than our nearest primate relatives.ⁱ

Often an extreme and unjustified emphasis is placed on characterization of dominance or submissive signaling in dogs. Dominance hierarchal theories, though commonly advocated, provide a poor model for both interpretation of canine behaviors and programs to remedy canine behavior problems. A dog's activities are based instead on a calculated "benefits versus risks" analysis which may be influenced by a variety of factors including genetics, learning, environment, experience, fears and physiological factors. The likelihood an individual dog would utilize aggression would be calculated when the dog considers 1) the severity of the threat, 2) the value of the resources and 3) the alternative options available. Labels regarding 'dominance' are often poor explanations for a dog's behavior and may misguide both veterinary professionals and family members into ill-advised status reduction programs.

Veterinary professionals need to carefully and accurately recognize of the canine body signals which may precede aggression both for the safety of people involved and the welfare of the dog. Though some dogs may become aggressive without warning, there are often signs of conflict, stress, anxiety or aggression that preceded the aggressive event. All dogs will growl, bite or snap if provocation, real or perceived threats persist. Subtle signs always precede aggressive events though some especially dangerous dogs will rapidly transition from subtle cues to aggression.

Threat aversion

Appeasement, submission and deference body signals are intended to cause the approaching dog or person to decrease their threat. These body postures are a dog's way to help stop or lessen oncoming aggression or punishment. If appeasement gestures are ignored and the threat persists then aggression may result. Often people will assume their dog is being aggressive due to dominance when in reality the dog displayed appeasement and deference signals that were ignored.

The most subtle signal is the avoidance of direct eye contact (aversion of the eyes). This is a very significant gesture since the opposite of which (a direct stare) communicates a threat. Some dogs may lower their ears, head and neck and may twist their neck sideways to look away. Some dogs will lift a paw as an appeasement gesture; often accompanied by diversion of eyes, blinking, lip licking or yawning. They may flick their tongue and often hold their tail low or between the legs. They may wag their tail but will often stop wagging or freeze when touched. Freezing or the absence of movement is a subtle sign of anxiety that is easily missed. These postures are often described as "appeasement" behaviours because they communicate a desire for the threat to stop. That is the dog showing appeasement would like to make peace and avoid a confrontation. In dog language, these postures are very clear and logical signals.

Progression of submissive signals includes: low crouching, raising a front paw, lying down, and rolling over to expose the abdomen. This behaviour developed from puppy hood when a pup would present to an adult in the group. Puppies learn and practice the skill of canine communication with friendly, social adult dogs. Just like not all people are great orators, not all dogs have the same skill at communicating. That is, some dogs are better communicators than others. Rolling over is a sign of extreme submission and may involve urination. Submissive rolling is therefore a sign of fear and deference and should not be misinterpreted for stubbornness or solicitation of petting. Realize that the ultimate goal of submissive posturing is to decrease any sign of perceived threat. Other dogs read these signals as a reason to be calm and relax. When people fail to recognize appeasement signals and continue to advance or interact the dog may become aggressive.

Guilt

Often, submissive signals are misinterpreted by owners to be indicative of “guilt” following an undesirable behaviour. In truth, dogs that display submissive postures towards their owners are likely responding to discernible human body language or past association with punishment and are attempting to lessen any forthcoming punishment. Simply put, the dog would simply like to human’s aggressive tirade to stop. This doesn’t imply that he feels guilty or remorseful about his misdeeds. This is appeasement; a gesture which communicates a desire for the threat to stop. Don’t assume that your dog knows what he did wrong just because he lays down and rolls over on his back; in fact, he probably has no idea what you are upset about -- he just hopes this grand canine gesture of appeasement will make the human tirade stop.

Conflict

Conflict-related behaviours arise when a dog is torn between conflicting motivations. For example, a dog may wish to be near his owner yet may be fearful at the same time. This may occur when a dog is put in a confrontational situation or when a dog cannot predict what is going to happen next. This internal conflict affects how a dog reacts to stress and can be manifested through characteristic body postures that serve as signals to communicate with other dogs. In general, dog body language is communicated on a graduated scale. Benign, subtle postures usually precede more aggressive, bold communications but an individual dog may present signals in any order. Warning signs or threats typically present first. The degree to which these can be readily discerned by people varies both in the dog’s skill at communicating and the human’s skill at recognizing these cues.

Assertive/Aggressive (Distance Increasing Signals)

Aggressive body signals attempt to increase the apparent size of the dog that feels threatened. This is an illusion that is meant to stop the approach of the perceived threatening dog or human. The goal is to avoid a fight with minimal effort and exertion of energy. The most subtle sign is a direct stare (direct eye contact with eyes wide open). In dog-to-dog communication, this signal is very effective and there is generally no need for further escalation. However if the dog continues to feel threatened, he may progress to displays of the mouth such as lips pulled back at the corners, retracting the lips into a snarl. Initially the dog may elevate the head, neck and ears and may then lower them as the threat builds. These postures mark an attempt of the dog to make itself appear larger and more challenging and also to protect the throat and ears in the case of imminent aggression.

If the dog continues to feel threatened he will continue to strengthen his body position by shifting his weight forward and stiffening his legs and toes to increase height. Hair over the shoulders and rump may raise to create the sudden illusion of increased height. Raised hackles, with or without barking, indicate that a dog is highly aroused. The tail may be held vertically or arched over the back. Movement of the tail may be slow and deliberate or rapid and vibrating, called “flagging”. Alert dogs tend to stand with their tail and ears up and a foot out, indicating an intention movement and possibly a willingness to approach. As stress heightens, the dog may snap (inhibited bite) as a final warning to indicate that the dog is willing to bite if the current situation continues or escalates.

Playful/solicitous (Distance Decreasing Signals)

These signals are an invitation to approach, play or interact socially. Body postures such as bold, animated play bow which often clearly indicates desire to interact. Most people read this animated invitational overture correctly. Other times a dog may demonstrate distance decreasing signals by a passive approach posture which may include ears back, paw lifted, lip licking and a tucked tail. It may be difficult to interpret the intended communication when a dog rolls over on his back: sometimes this communicates a desire to be stroked on the

belly (learned response) and other times it indicates extreme submission and an unwillingness to interact. Reading a dog's body postures in a specific context and recognizing that each dog is an individual capable of their own variations and individual expression will help people understand their dogs own signals.

Resources

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