

RSPCA WA'S HAPPY DOG GUIDE

Learn how to understand your dog for
a happy, harmonious life together.



A golden retriever dog is the central focus of the image, sitting and looking directly at the camera with its tongue out, appearing happy. The background is a blurred green forest scene.

Welcome to RSPCA WA's Dog Behaviour Guide!

"A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself."
— Josh Billings

We believe it's so important to understand your furry friend's behaviour to ensure they live a happy and harmonious life with you. After all, they're our best friends, and although they can't speak to us, they're constantly communicating with us.

So whether you've got one dog or four, have a browse of our guide to get a little more insight into the life of your dog and what you can do to keep their tail wagging!

All about your dog

Dogs are believed to have evolved from wolves around 40,000 years ago, with proof of domesticated dogs interacting with humans as far back as 36,000 years ago. The dog was one of the first animals to live alongside humans, earlier than cattle by thousands of years. Early dogs learned to scavenge around nomadic hunter-gatherer camps and slowly integrated into the tribe. Dogs are now more 'family' than pack!

It is very important to socialise your dog so they can comfortably integrate into your family. Dogs have a 'critical socialisation period' between approximately 3-17 weeks of age. The puppy's experiences during this period can influence and shape their behaviour well into adulthood. Providing plenty of opportunities for exposure to different environments during this time can help to ensure your dog grows into a well-adjusted adult.

Dogs that haven't had these positive experiences as puppies may just need a bit more patience and support to build confidence in new environments.

Note

You should make sure that the other dogs and puppies are friendly, healthy, and up-to-date with their vaccinations.

How do dogs communicate with us?

***"Why does watching a dog be a dog fill one with happiness?"
— Jonathan Safran Foer***

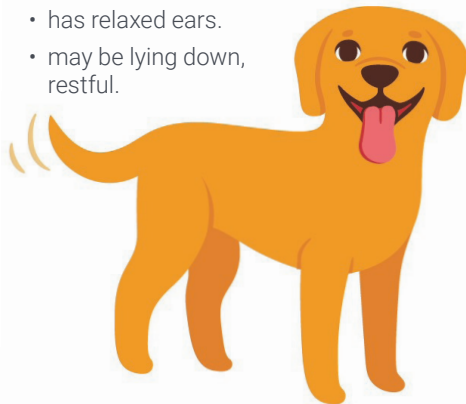
Dogs have evolved to form large social groups with humans and provide both verbal and non-verbal communication. Through body language, dogs use their tails, ears, eyes, body position and facial expressions to let us know how they are feeling.

Barking, howling and growling are also natural ways of communication for dogs. A dog may bark while playing, to warn you of danger, discipline younger dogs, threaten intruders, or just because they are curious!

It is important to take in the entire dog's body language to get the full picture of what they are feeling or trying to tell us.

A relaxed, friendly dog...

- wags their tail in broad strokes with a wiggly-bum.
- has a loose body.
- may do a play bow.
- has relaxed ears.
- may be lying down, restful.



A stressed or worried dog may...

- have a rigid body, ears up, alert.
- lick their lips.
- pant (when not hot or thirsty).
- yawn (when not tired).
- be hypervigilant (looking around constantly).
- have their tail lifted high.
- have the hair raised up on the back of their neck.
- be showing 'whale eye', where you can see the whites of a dog's eyes.

Note

Nervous panting is often confused with smiling.



A fearful dog may...

- have their body lowered to the ground, cowering.
- have their ears back or to the side.
- have their brow furrowed.
- have their tail between legs.
- move in slow motion.
- attempt to move away.

Note

A fearful dog may resort to aggression. If your dog is showing these signs, it is important to remove them from their current situation in a careful manner.



How dogs learn

“A happy dog has learned that life is predictable, with proper guidance and well-established routines.”

— Dr Hugh Wirth

It's important to understand that dogs are like people, learning at their own speed, with different strengths and weaknesses. When there is a change in the environment, your dog may also change their behaviour.

Dogs learn through the immediate consequences of an action. For example, if your dog begs for food at the table and you reward them with food, they will connect the action of begging with the immediate consequence, which is a reward of food.

Dogs also learn by association.

An example you may notice is that the sound of opening a pantry door or a jar of treats will signal to your dog that food is on the way!

You can use these positive connections to teach your dog to associate a happy reward with a task they may otherwise dislike. For example, if your dog loves chicken but does not like being brushed, you can reward your dog with chicken every time the brush comes out.

Soon they'll associate the brush with chicken!

Helpful Tips

Keep small and easy to retrieve treats in your pocket for quick rewards or buy a treat pouch and take it with you whenever you take your dog out. Remember that you are always teaching your dog by how you respond to their behaviour, so:

- Have multiple types of treats and try to use high value treats (like chicken) for special rewards.
- Always have treats on hand when you are outside with your dog. When they show correct behaviours, make sure you give them one to positively reinforce the behaviour.
- Keep training sessions short — five minutes is enough. You can train your dog in an ad break.
- When first starting to train your dog, begin in your backyard or an area with minimal distractions, then work your way up.
- Your dog can learn visual and verbal queues. Use both to help your pup learn correct behaviours or tricks.



Reward-based training

"Scratch a dog and you'll find a permanent job."

– Franklin P. Jones

RSPCA WA supports reward-based teaching where the dog is rewarded positively for performing the 'good' behaviour.

Reward training is the most humane and effective way of training dogs and addressing any unwanted behaviours. It's both enjoyable for the dog and enhances your relationship. Rewards can be treats, favourite toys or verbal praise such as "good dog" in a pleasant tone of voice, to be given when the dog performs good behaviour. Not every dog loves food, so find out what your dog loves the most, and involve that in your training.

Reward training involves ignoring 'unwanted' behaviours. When your dog is not rewarded for any unwanted behaviour then they tend to stop exhibiting those behaviours. It also helps to teach them what you want them to do instead.



Note

It is important to not use aversive techniques, physical punishment, or asserting physical dominance over your dog. These are not effective and can exacerbate problem behaviour.

Alone and anxious

“Such short little lives our pets have to spend with us, and they spend most of it waiting for us to come home each day.” – John Grogan

Seeing your dog’s sad face every day when you leave for work can be heartbreaking. What is worse is coming back home and finding your dog has been upset the entire time you have been away.

Many dogs can become anxious when separated from their owners. Behaviours can include (among other signs of distress):

- toileting in the house.
- destructiveness.
- excessive barking, digging or pacing.
- attempting to escape.

If you believe your dog is showing signs of separation anxiety, it is important to learn how to properly manage this behaviour. Reach out to a professional dog trainer or consult your vet.

Note

RSPCA WA offers professional dog training that can help with this behaviour. Visit www.rspcawa.org.au for more information or call 9209 9309

Ideas for keeping your dog enriched and entertained

Enrichment items:

- **Kong toys** – Stuff your dog's breakfast into a Kong so they are distracted when you go to work. It'll also provide a great mental activity as they work hard to get all the food out of it.
- **Frozen treats**
- **Licking or snuffle mats*** – You can make these yourself or buy them from a pet store. A snuffle mat forces your dog to sniff out the treats which you can hide in between the fabric or ridges.
- **Puzzle toys***
- **Kiddie pool** – Buy a clam shell and fill it with water, sand, or even balls. This can provide hours of fun for dogs to play in. You can also hide treats in there for your dog to find.

- **Muffin tin with tennis balls** – An old muffin tin can be a great enrichment toy for dogs. Just get a handful of treats, put them in the tin and put some tennis balls on top of them. Your dog will knock the balls out to get the treats.
- **Hide and seek** – Putting treats in cardboard boxes* and toilet paper rolls* (but be prepared for a mess!).

Note

**Always supervise you dog when it is using these items!*

Enrichment is a way of changing an animal's environment to stimulate their natural behaviours and increase their positive physical and mental activity. There are so many fun and creative ideas for enriching your dog's life and they don't have to be expensive! Enrichment is also a great way of reducing problem behaviours and stress in our dogs.

There are many great ideas online for enrichment as well as DIY examples.

Enriching food and treats – Giving your dog their breakfast in a Kong means they'll be happy to see you leave in the morning and it will keep them busy while you step out the door. Fill Kong type toys with food that will take your dog at least 20-30 minutes to eat while you're away. Freezing your dog's Kong will keep them busy for much longer as well as providing a cool treat in the hotter months.

Hiding your dog's food or scatter feeding your dog can provide a fun activity and exercises their brain. You can also purchase slow feeding bowls for a similar mental activity.

Tip

It is important to not overfeed your dog, so any food used for enrichment can be taken out of their breakfast or dinner.



Please note

The advice in this guide is intended to be general in nature. If you have specific concerns about your dog's behaviour or health, please seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian or animal behaviourist.

RSPCA WA Dog Training will teach your dog off-lead control, recall, toilet training, and basic dog obedience commands using positive techniques.

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