

## Dog Language

We all want to communicate with our dogs. We want them to understand us, but even more so I think we want to understand them. What are they REALLY saying and how do they FEEL? Most dog language is non-verbal. Of course, as dog owners/lovers we are all familiar with barks, whines, and various other sounds, but what about your dog's BODY language?

This article will not cover the full scope of dog language but will address some of the most common misconceptions about dog body language with a focus on spotting stress signals.

**Tail wags:** Probably the most misunderstood of all body language is the tail wag. When reading your dog's body, it is important to look at the WHOLE dog as well as the situation they are in to get an accurate idea of what they are trying to say or what is their mood. Tail wags do NOT always mean a happy friendly dog. Look up videos of dogs attacking things and almost always their tail is wagging.

It depends on HOW the tail is wagging. Typically, the higher and faster the tail wags the more "aroused" the dog is. This is also true of a dog raising their hackles. Raised hackles do not in and of themselves show a state of aggression. What they show is high arousal. And even a friendly dog who is super excited can do something harmful because they are out of control. High arousal can go either way quite quickly.

Higher tails can show dominance or confidence. Midway tails can show friendliness, security, or neutral attitudes. Low tails can show fear or submission. But the SPEED of the tail also says something. So, speed combined with the height of the tail can send a very specific message. Typically, the faster the wag the more intense the feeling. Even the direction of the wag says something. If the tail wags more to the left the dog may be unsure or scared of something, whereas to the right it shows a more positive feeling about whatever they are focused on.

However, keeping in mind the tail itself is not the "tell all." You MUST look at the whole picture and the whole dog.

**Play Bows:** Another misunderstood signal. Most of the time a play bow is an invitation to play. However, in some circumstances a play bow can be done when a dog is unsure of meeting another dog and is either getting themselves in a position to leap away easily or is telling the other dog "Look at me I am just a puppy and not harmful to you." In the latter case it may be done by a dog who is unsure if the approaching dog is friendly or not. Displaying puppy-like signals are used to get the other dog to not hurt them. This is similar when a dog shows their belly to another dog, which is a puppy-like signal to appease the other dog and is also a sign of submission or fear.

**Signs of Stress:** (can also be appeasement signals or calming signals) Signs of stress in a dog have a wide range of signals. These signals not only show the dog is stressed but may also be appeasement signals (meant to stop the other dog/person from being a "threat" and thereby stopping the stressful feelings). Calming signals have 2 uses. They can either help the dog to relax or send a signal to another dog to relax. Yawning is one such signal. Yawns can show stress, be done to help a dog relax from stress, or tell another dog there is no reason to be stressed.

Some common stress signals would be (besides vocal ones such as whining):

- yawning
- pacing
- crouching
- tucked tail
- lip licking
- ears back or down
- whale eye (whites showing)
- hiding behind you or hugging the wall
- avoidance (either moving head or body away or looking away)

- panting
- scratching
- shaking (not like after a bath, but trembling)
- lifting a single paw

Some examples of calming signals (or appeasement signals) are:

- yawning
- shaking (not trembling, but a "shake off" like after a bath)
- sniffing the ground
- showing belly
- stretching or play bow

**Therapy Visits:** How does all of this relate to doing therapy visits with our dogs? It is important to learn to recognize the signs of stress in our dogs. Our dogs are communicating with us all the time. But many do not see or understand it. When we learn more about what are dogs are actually SAYING using their body language, we can better help them cope with situations, by either avoiding that situation, or doing training specifically to help them cope with that situation. Not only will our dogs be happier, but everyone stays safer as well. A dog that is stressed or fearful or over aroused can cause harm.

### **Resources:**

#### **See the Dog Language Sheet Provided Here:**

<https://doggiedrawings.net/products/doggie-language-poster?collection=free-downloads> (there are LOTS of free downloads available to help you)

#### **Video of Tail Wags:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiL7xYy\\_MAQ&ab\\_channel=TheFarmer%27sDog](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiL7xYy_MAQ&ab_channel=TheFarmer%27sDog)

**Here is a Video that will Test Your Knowledge of Tail Wags:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFq1Jk0w2EM&ab\\_channel=InstinctDogBehavior%26Training](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFq1Jk0w2EM&ab_channel=InstinctDogBehavior%26Training)

**Here is a Video Showing some Dog to Dog Interaction, See if you can See all of their "Signals":**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9Gr2pzUEqo&ab\\_channel=JillMarie](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9Gr2pzUEqo&ab_channel=JillMarie) (note: I did list SOME of the signals in the video but not all of them, see if you can see more!)

Feel free to reach out to the Canine Facilitator team if you have any questions.