

# Dog's Body Language

All higher life forms (including the birds and the bees) can communicate within their species and often with other species. Early humans must have had advanced non-verbal communications, or we never would have evolved to the point we are at now. We fortunately had the necessary anatomy to develop speech, which we now rely on as our principle communication means. However, we still retain much of our non-verbal skills. How much better do we communicate face-to-face than over the phone or via email?

Dogs also have highly developed communication skills within their species and have extended that to inter-species with humans. Everyone who has worked with dogs understands how well they read our body language, expressions and emotions. I am convinced that, if their anatomy allowed it, they would learn our language and speak to us. They have no trouble understanding our speech. When you think about it, they have some mastery of two languages; theirs and ours, whereas many of us have only mastered one. This just establishes another way that they are smarter than us 😊.

By its very definition, an "Alert Dog" must be able to communicate with us! We tend to try to meet this end by teaching them yet another language. I.e, some action (bark, paw, lick) to inform us of something, where this new language may not be very natural for them. So, it behooves us to try to learn their natural language, as they try so hard to learn ours.

The first step to learning what they are trying to tell us to become very familiar with their appearance and actions when they are not trying to tell us anything. I found a pretty good description of that on <http://4hpetpals.osu.edu/dogBehavior.htm>.

## Relaxed Posture

A relaxed dog displays a natural body posture. This dog is not worried or threatened by what is going on in his immediate surroundings. He is content and reasonably happy. Knowing what a dog looks and acts like when he displays this posture serves as a foundation for determining his other behaviors.



- Eyes relaxed and slowly blinking
- Ears pricked (up) but not forward, or relaxed slightly down and back
- Mouth loose, corners relaxed, mouth may be slightly open
- Tongue may be slightly visible or hanging over lower teeth
- Soft muscle tone
- Weight evenly distributed on all four feet
- Tail down and even, may show relaxed sweeping back and forth

The relaxed posture is the absence of communication intent. Maybe what they are saying is that “I have nothing to say”. Our job is to become very familiar with this posture so that we will easily recognize changes from this norm.

## Alert Posture

An alert dog is aroused by something interesting in his environment. He is standing at attention, ready to react depending on what happens next.

- Eyes open wide, alert eye contact (however, this may signal aggression from a strange dog)
- Ears pricked and forward, may move back and forth
- Mouth closed
- Tail pointing away from dog, almost horizontal, not stiff or bristled
- Leans body slightly forward
- Stands tall on toes



This is the first thing to watch for. It could be just “I see a cat”, or “There is a ball to play with”. However, it could also be “I smell a peanut”, or “I smell a low”, or “Ezra is acting strangely”. Our challenge is to recognize that this generalized alert is correlated to the condition we wish to be alerted about. If this is recognized, the first step is just to treat, or praise, this response. The next step is to add the desired additional response before treating (sit, woof, paw, etc.). Do not go too fast with this. You should first establish that the pup is old enough to be trained (success with sit, down, etc.). Then you should develop the desired response when the dog is in the relaxed state. If he is proficient in the relaxed state, he is more apt to respond reliably when in the alert state.

I throw the following in, just for interest, as it can be a misunderstood posture.

## Playful or Play Bow Posture

The play bow invites others to play. Dogs may also use a play bow to communicate that any prior rough behavior was not intended to be threatening. Dogs may also assume this posture if they have done something wrong, to let you know they meant no harm and really just wanted to play.



- Ears pricked, may move back and forth
- Lips pulled back, mouth open, tongue visible
- Slight grin
- Front end lowered
- Forepaws bent and extended
- Hind end up
- Tail up, may give sweeping wags
- May stutter bark or give high-pitched short barks

And there are more described in the article.

#### Other communication Possibilities

There are other ways that our dogs try to communicate with us. The list is too long to include here. In fact the list is probably endless, as I am convinced that our dogs are fairly inventive and will come up with responses that are, in fact, unique to them alone. I can imagine the frustration of our dogs when we do not respond to their message. I can just hear their brains saying “what is the matter with this stupid human that they cannot understand the clearest of messages?”.

Here is a list of invented responses that I have heard of. I am sure that you can add many more.

Excited barking

Running back and forth between victim and parent

Pawing victim

Pawing parent

Nudging legs

Nervous licking

Gentle nibbling

Chasing tail (Casey does this when excited)

Whining

Intense eye contact

Lying on child

Bringing toys to victim

#### **Stress Signs that could indicate recognition**

Dogs are very sensitive to human emotions, and during the training phases, the emotions of the parents during an episode could cause stress in the dog. Earlier this year, Susan presented an interesting study on this subject, which included dog actions that could identify that the dog is in stress. Any of these could be an indication that your dog is recognizing an important event, which it finds stressful at this time.

### **How Can We Identify Stress?**

- Inability to calm down, restless
- Overreaction to things happening (i.e. doorbell)
- Use of calming signals
- Scratching
- Biting or excessive licking himself
- Biting and chewing on inappropriate objects
- Barking, howling, whining
- Tense muscles
- Shaking
- Chasing his tail
- Generally looking unhealthy
- Panting
- Toileting more frequently than normal
- Looking nervous and hyper-vigilant
- Behaving aggressively

### **Bottom Line**

Keep a faithful log of any unusual behavior, and lows, or seizures with accurate times of occurrence. A careful study of this after a month, or two, should reveal a pattern, if there is one.