



**The Dog-to-  
English Dictionary  
Explaining Common  
Dog Behaviors and  
Expressions They Use  
to "Speak" With Us  
and Each Other**

Have you ever wished your dog could speak to you? What if we told you he can, and does! The trick to understanding him is to listen with your eyes and not your ears. If we humans were half as good at reading their signals as they are at reading ours, there would be a lot less miscommunication between our two species.

Humans are a verbal species. We long for our beloved canine companions to speak to us in words we can easily understand. While they have some capacity for vocal communication, they'll never be able to deliver a soliloquy, or carry on long meaningful conversations with their humans. English is a second language for them. Their first is body talk – body language communication in which they generally say, quite clearly, exactly what they mean.

Dogs do use some vocalizations in their daily communication with us and with each other. However, their body language is both more expressive and more prevalent – it's continual! – so observing them in action is of more use than just listening to them.

### **Grasping Dog Vocabulary**

The more you learn about your dog's subtle body language communications the better you'll be at reading them – and intervening appropriately, well before your dog is compelled to growl, snap, or bite. It's important that you not focus on just one piece of the message. The various parts of your dog's body work together to tell the complete story; unless you read them all and interpret them in context, you'll miss important elements. Be especially aware of your dog's tail, ears, eyes, mouth, hair, and body posture.

Because dog communication is a constant flow of information, it's sometimes difficult to pick out small signals until you've become an educated observer. Start by studying photographs of dog body language, then watch videos that you can rewind and watch repeatedly, finally honing your skills on live dogs. Dog parks, doggie daycare centers, and training class playgroups are ideal places to practice your observation skills. Sarah Kalnajs' DVD set, "The Language of Dogs," is an excellent resource for body-language study.



**Relaxed, open mouth; half-closed eyes, and ears partway to the side tell us that all is good with Otto's world.**

### **Oblivious to Your Dog's Stress?**

Dogs tell us when they feel stressed. The more aware you are of your dog's stress-related body language, the better you can help him out of situations that could otherwise escalate to inappropriate and dangerous behaviors. Many bites occur because owners fail to recognize and respond appropriately to their dogs' stress signals. There are multiple reasons why it's important to pay attention to stress indicators:

- Stress is a universal underlying cause of aggression.
- Stress can have a negative impact on a dog's health.
- Dogs learn poorly when stressed.
- Dogs respond poorly to cues when stressed.
- Negative classical conditioning can occur as a result of stress.

The smart, aware owner is always on the alert for signs that her dog is stressed, so she can alleviate tension when it occurs. Owners whose dogs are easily stressed often become hyper-vigilant, watching for tiny signs that presage more obvious stress-related behaviors, in order to forestall unpleasant reactions. If more owners were aware

of these subtle signs of stress, fewer dogs would bite. That would be a very good thing.

### **Bitten “Without Warning”**

Before they bite, dogs almost always give clear – albeit sometimes subtle – signals. The mythical “bite without warning” is truly a rare occurrence. Most of the time the human just wasn’t “listening” or didn’t understand what was being expressed.

### **Show us How You Really Feel**

We tend to focus on aggression signals because they are the most impressive and can predict danger. But any observant and aware dog owner knows that dogs offer a lot of happy communications as well. They’ll use their bodies and voices to communicate when they’re feeling happy, comfortable, safe, or excited! For example, behaviors such as jumping up, pawing, nudging, barking, and mouthing are often about happy excitement and attention-seeking.



**Ears flat back, a hard stare, lowered body posture, and tension in the closed mouth are signs of a fearful dog. Approach with caution; better yet, don’t approach at all.**

That said, below is a list of observable signs a dog may be feeling stressed – a sort of canine stress dictionary – followed by a glance at each body part through a zoom lens.

## **A Brief Canine Stress Dictionary**

### **Appeasement/Deference Signals**

When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress. Appeasement and deference signals include:

Slow movement: appeasing/deferent dog appears to be moving in slow-motion

Lip-licking: appeasing/deferent dog licks at the mouth of the higher ranking member of the social group

Sitting/lying down/exposing underside: appeasing/deferent dog lowers body posture, exposing vulnerable parts

Turning head away, averting eyes: appeasing/deferent dog avoids eye contact, exposes neck

### **Avoidance**

Dog turns away; shuts down; evades handler’s touch and treats.

### **Brow Ridges**

Furrows or muscle ridges in the dog’s forehead and around the eyes.

### **Displacement Behaviors**

These are behaviors performed in an effort to resolve an internal stress conflict for the dog. They may be observed in a dog who is stressed and in isolation – for example a dog left alone in an exam room in a veterinary hospital – differentiating them from behaviors related to relationship.

Blinking: Eyes blink at a faster-than normal rate

Nose-Licking: Dog’s tongue flicks out once or multiple times

Chattering teeth

Scratching

Shaking off (as if wet, but dog is dry)

Yawning

### **Drooling**

May be an indication of stress – or response to the presence of food, an indication of a mouth injury, or digestive distress.

### **Excessive Grooming**

Dog may lick or chew paws, legs, flank, tail, and genital areas, even to the point of self-mutilation.

### **Hyperactivity**

Frantic behavior, pacing, sometimes misinterpreted as ignoring, “fooling around,” or “blowing off” owner.

### **Lack of Attention/Focus**

The brain has difficulty processing information when stressed.

### **Leaning/Clinging**

The stressed dog seeks contact with human as reassurance.

### **Lowered Body Posture**

“Slinking,” acting “guilty,” or “sneaky” (all misinterpretations of dog body language) can be indicators of stress.

### **Mouthing**

Willingness to use mouth on human skin – can be puppy exploration or adult poor manners, but can also be an expression of stress, ranging from gentle nibbling (flea biting) to hard taking of treats, to painfully hard mouthing, snapping, or biting.

### **Panting**

Rapid shallow or heavy breathing is normal if the dog is warm or has been exercising, otherwise can be stress-related. Stress may be external (environment) or internal (pain, other medical issues).

### **Stretching**

To relax stress-related tension in muscles. May also occur as a non-stress behavior after sleeping or staying in one place for extended period.

### **Stiff Movement**

Tension can cause a noticeable stiffness in leg, body, and tail movements.

### **Trembling**

May be due to stress – or cold.

### **Whining**

High-pitched vocalization, irritating to most humans; an indication of stress. While some may interpret it as excitement, a dog who is excited to the point of whining is also stressed.

### **Yawning**

Your dog may yawn because he’s tired – or as an appeasement signal or displacement behavior.

## **A Close Look at each Body Part**

Despite conventional wisdom, a wagging tail doesn’t always mean a happy dog. Remember that breed characteristics can complicate the message; the relaxed ears and tail of an Akita (prick-eared, tail curled over the back) look very different from the relaxed ears and tail of a Golden Retriever (drop-eared; long, low tail).

Also note that if body language vacillates back and forth it can indicate ambivalence or conflict, which may precede a choice toward aggression.

There is great value in having a solid understanding of canine facial expressions and their accompanying body language and behavior. The following are some of the more common canine communications offered by those very expressive furry faces and fuzzy bodies. Keep in mind, though, that when drawing conclusions about a dog’s facial expressions, it’s important to factor in the rest of the body language in order to get the whole message. Context is everything.

## **The Eyes**

**In a Nutshell:** Averted, no eye contact: Submissive/appeasing, deferent, or fearful; may be a subtle flick of the eyes, or may turn entire head away

Squinting, or eyes closed: Submissive/appeasing,

happy greeting

Soft, direct eye contact: Calm, relaxed, friendly

Eyes open wide: Confident, assertive.

Hard stare: Alert, excitement, arousal; could be play aroused in play or aroused in aggression

A dog's eyes, like a human's, are capable of conveying a multitude of meanings and emotions. Here are common eye expressions:

### **Avoiding eye contact**



While the human species prizes direct eye contact as a measure of someone's character and honesty, in the dog world, direct eye contact can be perceived as a threat. Often, unless a dog has been strongly reinforced for making and keeping eye contact, he will look away when you look at him. It's a deference behavior – his way of saying he doesn't have any desire to challenge you. He's doing his best to be polite and non-confrontational. Unfortunately, humans often perceive a dog as being sneaky if he won't look them in the eye – a totally off-base interpretation of a very sweet canine trait. If you want your dog to make eye contact with you more, avoid body language that suggests to him he needs to defer to you, and spend lots of time reinforcing him for looking you in the eye.

### **Squinty eyes**



This is a sign of appeasement, which is often a good thing, if it is simply the dog's nature to be appeasing. However, appeasement can also be a signal for fear, which is not such a good thing. If the dog is squinting and approaching, it's a friendly, social expression, and it is probably safe to interact with him. If the dog is squinting with his body posture back and lowered, it is likely fear. If you approach he may feel threatened, and bite.

### **Soft eye contact**



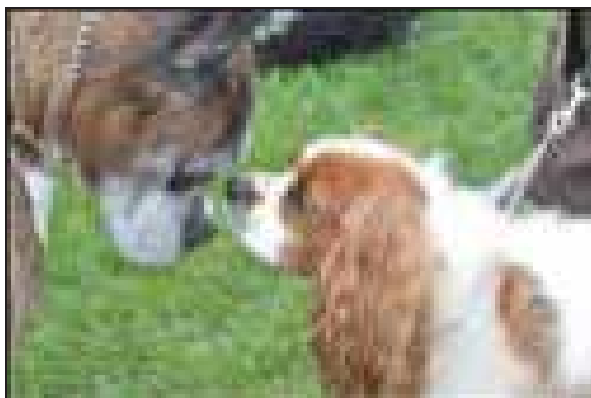
This is a dog who is social, confident and friendly. The eyes are round or almond-shaped and soft, with the pupils dilated appropriately for available lighting (small pupils if light is bright, large if light is dim). Often accompanied by affiliative (distance decreasing) behavior such as a relaxed tail wag, and body curved or even wiggling.



## Hard stare



This is a hard, direct stare which, if you are good at reading dogs, gives you the chills. It is not friendly. The eyes are piercing, and there is often little or no body movement. Accompanying body language is usually assertive – dog is standing tall and forward, tail erect and still or wagging stiffly. May be part of a pre-aggression “freeze” where the dog goes completely still. If this warning is ignored, the dog is likely to bite.



**This could be trouble; the Cavalier King Charles is giving a very tense, hard stare at the Boxer, who calmly averts his eyes to avoid triggering a confrontation.**

## Whale eye



This is a dog trainer term for when a dog shows the whites of his eyes. While it is often a warning sign and precursor to a bite, it really just means the dog is looking sideways while his nose is pointing forward. It is often seen with resource guarding because the dog is keeping his nose pointed at the valuable resource while watching you to gauge how much of a threat you are.

## The Ears

**In a Nutshell:** Pinned back: Submissive/appealing, deferent, or fearful

Back and relaxed: Calm, relaxed, friendly

Forward and relaxed: Aware, friendly

Pricked forward: Alert, excitement, arousal, assertive; could be play arousal or aggression arousal.

A dog's ears are like semaphore flags – they send clear signals to anyone who knows the code. Fortunately, the dog ear code is considerably simpler than semaphore. A dog with dropped (droopy) or (heaven forbid) cropped ears can be harder to read, but the signals are still there.

Regardless of ear style, ears that are pinned back against the head can mean one of several things. It can be happy appeasement, fear, or stress. As with the squinty eyes, the rest of the dog's body language will give you clear clues as to which it is for the dog in front of you, and you can adjust your own interaction with the dog accordingly.

### Ears relaxed



For a prick-eared dog, the ears are still up and forward, but not hard forward, and may even swivel to the side. For a drop-eared dog, the ears are hanging flat against the side of the face instead of pulled forward. Relaxed ears generally mean a relaxed dog.

### Ears pulled back



Regardless of ear style, ears that are pinned back against the head can mean one of several things. It can be happy appeasement, fear, or stress. As with the squinty eyes, the rest of the dog's body language will give you clear clues as to which it

is for the dog in front of you, and you can adjust your own interaction with the dog accordingly.



### Ears pricked hard forward



This is a dog who is aroused and alert. The ears alone don't tell you if it's excited-happy-aroused/alert or aggressive-aroused/alert. If the eyes are soft and the body is wiggly, it's the former; if the eyes are hard and the body is tense, it's the latter.

### The Mouth

**In a Nutshell:** Lips pulled back: Submissive/appeasing or fearful (may also be lifted in "submissive grin" or "aggressive grin")

Licking lips, yawning: Stressed, fearful – or tired!

Lips relaxed: Calm, relaxed, friendly

Lips puckered forward, may be lifted (snarl):  
Assertive, threatening.

### **Relaxed**



Your dog's mouth, when relaxed should be closed, or slightly open. If closed and relaxed, the skin around the mouth will be wrinkle-free, with possible exceptions for the wrinkly and brachycephalic (short-faced) breeds.

### **Tense**



If your dog's mouth is relaxed and open, and he slowly closes it, his body goes still, and there are lines around his mouth, he is not happy. Use caution, especially if his body also goes still. This is often part of the freeze sequence that is the precursor to a bite.

### **Open, Panting**



A dog can pant for several reasons. He may have just been exerting himself, and is panting to cool off. He may be overheated, in which case emergency cooling measures are called for to prevent heat stroke or even death. Or he may be stressed. Again, evaluating the rest of his body language, as well as knowing what activities he's been recently engaged in and taking into account the ambient temperature, will help you determine which panting is happening. Also, acute stress and distress panting is often very fast and shallow, as opposed to relaxed panting which is often slower and deeper.

### **Licking**

Sometimes dogs lick to greet. Sometimes dogs do appeasement licking. Sometimes dogs lick their lips to get the last bits of flavor from the last tasty thing they ate. Sometimes dogs lick themselves persistently because of allergies or some other medical issue, or because of a canine compulsive disorder. And sometimes dogs lick their lips because they are stressed. Sometimes canine professionals have a tendency to overreact and call any lip-licking stress licking. It's not necessarily. It might be. Let the rest of the dog's body language help you decide if it is or it isn't.



## Yawning



Sometimes dogs yawn because they are tired. Sometimes dogs yawn because yawning is contagious. Sometimes dogs yawn because they are stressed. Again, look at the whole dog – and then decide.

## Commissure



This is just a fancy word for the corners of your dog's mouth. Take note of how the commissure looks when your dog is calm and relaxed, and remember it for comparison purposes. There are two significant variations on the commissure. If the corners are pulled forward and the commissure forms a "C" shape, the dog is being offensively aggressive. If the corners are pulled tightly back, forming a "V" shape, the dog is being defensively aggressive. Either way, watch out!

## Snarl

As clumsy as some people are at reading canine body language, this one is pretty hard to miss. When the lips curl up and all those shiny white



fangs are exposed, the message is usually pretty clear. The snarl is usually accompanied by very hard eyes, while the ears may be pricked hard forward or pinned back, depending on whether the dog is being offensively or defensively aggressive.

## Submissive Grin

Often mistaken for a snarl, the submissive or appeasement grin is a bit of a mystery in canine communication. It is only seen very rarely in dog-dog interactions, but is not uncommon for dogs with soft, appealing personalities to offer to humans. One theory is that the dogs are actually mimicking human smiles! At any rate, it's a lovely behavior that can get dogs in trouble because people think they are being aggressive when they most certainly aren't. If you're not sure, quickly check the rest of the dog's body language to clues as to which it really is. I say "quickly" because if it really is a snarl, prompt evasive action may be required on your part.

## Facial Muscles

You probably never gave much thought to the fact that a dog's face has muscles – but of course it does. Without them, dogs would be unable to create all the adorable facial expressions that we love so much – as well as the ones that aren't so cute. You know what the cute ones are. There are a couple of places where facial muscles create tension lines, and these are the ones you want to watch out for.

## Lack of Brow Lines (calm)



A calm, relaxed dog's brow is as smooth as a baby's bottom (again, with those wrinkly-dog exceptions).



## Mouth Lines



You can also see tension in the lines around your dog's mouth. A relaxed dog's lips are flat and wrinkle-free.

## The Tail

**In a Nutshell:** Tucked under: Submissive/appeasing, deferent, or fearful

Low and still: Calm, relaxed

Low to medium carriage, gently waving: Relaxed, friendly

Low to medium carriage, fast wag: Submissive/appeasing or happy, friendly

High carriage, still/vibrating or fast wag: Tension, arousal, excitement; could be play arousal or aggression arousal



**Don't be fooled! This Husky's erect tail is normal tail-carriage position for the breed. His relaxed eyes, mouth, and ears tell us he is not aroused.**

## Body Posture

**In a Nutshell:** Weight towards the back, body lowered towards the ground; hackles may be raised: Could be submissive and/or appeasing or fearful

Weight evenly distributed on all four legs, full height: Confident, relaxed

Weight towards the front, standing tall; hackles may be raised: Assertive, alert, excitement, arousal; could be play arousal or aggressive arousal

Shoulders lowered, front legs outstretched, hind-quarters elevated: A play bow is a clear invitation

to play; the dog is sending a message that behavior that might otherwise look like aggression is intended in play.

### **Hair**

Piloerection: Also known as “raised hackles,” this is simply a sign of arousal. While it can indicate aggression, dogs may also show piloerection when they are fearful, uncertain, or engaged in excited play.

## **Understanding How Dogs Communicate with Each Other**

### **Reading dogs**

Paradigm shifts in the dog-training world in the last couple of decades have led dog owners and trainers to pay closer attention to the observation, interpretation, and understanding of canine body language. Norwegian dog trainer Turid Rugaas identified more than 30 body gestures that dogs often make in social settings – whether with members of their own species or with humans.

We listed many of those signals earlier. Rugaas postulated that these signals demonstrated an intent to get along with other “pack members”. She coined the term “calming signals” to collectively describe these gestures and their purpose, and the term has found acceptance and everyday use as dog owners and trainers discuss dog behavior. Clumped behind that deceptively simple phrase, however, is a complex constellation of behaviors that accomplish many more purposes than just “calming”.

Rugaas has asserted that dogs purposely use “calming signals” to calm the other being with whom the dog is interacting. The suggestion is that the behaviors brought under this broad umbrella are deliberate.

Today, many ethologists (people who study animal behavior) speculate that the communications now popularly identified as calming signals are often hardwired, automatic responses rather than deliberate ones, and are far more complicated than a simple attempt to calm a dog's social partners. They likely have more to do with the presenter's own state of mind and/or an end goal

to affect the behavior of the other dog or human for the purpose of self-preservation – rather than a deliberate intent to change the state of mind of the other being.

Communicative behaviors are adaptive in nature, helping canids maintain peaceful pack relationships without resorting to violence. Ethologists suggest that nonthreatening canine behaviors are more important in keeping the peace between peers than dominance behaviors – that relations are primarily maintained by deference behaviors exhibited by subordinates toward high-ranking members, not “dominance” displays by the “alpha member.” Canine social groups may more appropriately be described as deference hierarchies rather than dominance hierarchies.

As such, the dozens of behaviors that have been dubbed calming signals might more appropriately be separated into several subgroups called appeasement (active submission), deference (passive submission), displacement, stress signs, and threat (dominance) displays.

By observing dogs, learning to recognize and respond to the various behaviors in this constellation, your relationships with canines will become richer, and your translations of dogspeak more accurate. Let's start by taking a closer look at the submissive/subordinate behaviors.

### **Please appease me**

As stated above, subordinate behaviors can be grouped into two general categories: active submission (appeasement), characterized by increased activity and diminished posture, and passive submission (deference), denoted by decreased activity and lowered body posture. The difference lies in whether the dog offering the submissive behavior desires attention from the higher-ranking individual, or would prefer that the attention he's receiving go away.

Active submission may also be identified as attention-seeking behavior: nuzzling, licking (including licking ears and lips), jumping up, paw lifts and pawing motions, “smiling,” teeth clacking, crouching, pretzeling, and play-bows. The dog's ears may be pulled back, and his tail may

be wagging expressively, with wide, sweeping movements or circles. These behaviors can often be seen during greetings between dog and owner, or between friendly, compatible dogs.

Passive submission usually involves a dramatic reduction in activity with a goal of diverting attention, and is most often seen in a lower-ranking dog when threats are directed toward him by a higher-ranking member of the social group (dog or human). The dog's ears may be pressed flat against the head, with his tail tucked between legs. The subordinate dog often freezes, averting eye contact, lowering his head and body, sometimes to the point of going "belly-up" on the ground. Passive submission may also be accompanied by submissive urination.

Below are descriptions of several common submissive behaviors, and suggestions for appropriate responses when the behavior is directed toward humans. When directed toward dogs, submissive behaviors usually elicit appropriate responses from the other canine. There are instances when submissive behaviors don't elicit appropriate responses from the other dog: when the other dog responds with increased intimidation – a classic "playground bully". Dogs who respond to an overt display of submission with increased aggression are not displaying normal canine behavior, and may need special management to prevent them from traumatizing their social partners.

### Active submission (appeasement)

Some of the gestures exhibited by a dog who demonstrates active submission can be obnoxious to us humans. The important thing to recognize is that, with these behaviors, the dog is communicating his recognition that you are his leader. Be a good leader and let him know how he can best appease you by redirecting his behavior into something less bothersome.

- **Nuzzling** – Dog pushes muzzle against you, perhaps under your arm or hand. If you respond by giving the dog attention (petting, making eye contact, speaking to him) you are positively reinforcing the behavior and it will continue or increase. This is fine if you like the behavior – and

some people do. It can, however, become annoying if the dog is very persistent.

You may prefer to extinguish the behavior using "negative punishment." When the dog nuzzles you, turn away or even walk away. The dog is seeking attention. If nuzzling consistently evokes the opposite of the intended response – attention goes away – the behavior will stop. Of course, you must educate all family members and visitors to respond to nuzzling in the same way, or the behavior will be randomly reinforced and will persist.



**The yellow Lab signals his active submission to the older female Pointer by pretzeling his body, lowering his forequarters and head, lifting a paw, keeping his tail waving big and low, and holding his ears back.**

Another option is to put the behavior on cue, and teach the dog that nudging only works to elicit attention when you ask for it. You can also preempt the nuzzle by consistently asking the dog for an incompatible behavior that gains him the attention he seeks. A "sit" or "down" can serve as incompatible and polite attention-seeking behaviors if you consistently give your dog attention for those.

- **Licking** – Dog licks body parts and clothes, including lip-licking, ear-licking, and nose-licking. Again, if you like this behavior, you can encourage it with positive reinforcement – giving your dog the attention he seeks when he licks.

If you don't enjoy your dog's licking, use negative punishment (licking makes you go away) and



install an incompatible behavior in its place. Having your dog hold a toy in mouth when he approaches people is a great attention-eliciting behavior that's incompatible with licking.

- **Jumping up** – Dog puts paws on human body, often projecting body against human with some force. A lot of small-dog owners don't seem to object to jumping up as an attention-getter, and a lot of small dogs are incorrigible jump-uppers as a result. Not all people with small dogs like this, however, and most people who live with medium-to-large dogs much prefer four-on-the-floor.

Jumping as an attention-getting behavior is positively reinforced by attention, even behavior that dog owners may offer to try to reduce jumping up, such as pushing the dog away, or telling him to get down. Once again, removing yourself from contact with the dog – taking the attention away – will reduce the behavior, especially if you replace it by reinforcing an incompatible behavior such as sit or down. See the pattern yet?

- **Paw lifts and pawing motions** – Dog lifts paw or paws at human. While uncontrolled pawing behavior can be annoying, a simple paw lift is a lovely behavior to put on cue and turn into a series of fun and useful behaviors. A paw lift on cue can become “shake,” “wave,” “high five,” and “salute,” and pawing motions can be useful for turning appliances on and off, indicating found objects for dogs doing scent and search work, pushing a ball (canine soccer!), and playing an electronic keyboard. Persistent, annoying pawing is best extinguished by ignoring the behavior and putting an incompatible behavior on cue, such as four-on-the-floor, or a gentle paw lift.

- **Teeth clacking** – Dog's teeth click or chatter. This is an innocuous behavior, and one that you can simply ignore – unless you're an avid trainer and want to encourage it by clicking and treating when the dog offers it, then putting it on cue.

- **Crouching** – Dog lowers his body closer to the ground. This is also an innocuous attention-seeking behavior. If it bothers you, ignore it, and reinforce your dog when he approaches you standing taller. Training, using positive methods, will also

increase your dog's confidence and decrease incidents where he feels compelled to make himself smaller.

- **Pretzeling** – Dog corkscrews his body into a “C” shape. This is also a harmless, kind of cute behavior. If you liked it, you could reinforce it and put it on cue!

- **Play bow** – Dog lowers his forequarters while keeping his hindquarters elevated. This is a lovely behavior, and we can't imagine someone wanting to extinguish it. Reinforce and put it on cue!

- **Smiling** – Dog lifts his lips into a grimace that is unaccompanied by other behaviors that would indicate at threat. There is no reason to try to make this behavior go away as long as humans around the dog understand that it's not an aggressive behavior. It's quite cute! If you want, encourage it by clicking and treating when the dog offers a smile, and then put it on cue!

### Passive submission (deference)

Deference behaviors are offered by the dog in response to a perceived threat; there doesn't have to be any intent to threaten on the part of the person interacting with the dog. For all of the deference behaviors listed below, the appropriate response is to determine how/why the dog perceives a human or humans as threatening, and then work to change the dog's perception through consistent positive associations with the perceived threat(s).

Human behaviors that can be perceived as threatening by a dog (thereby eliciting deference behaviors) include direct eye contact, a full-frontal approach, a loud voice, bending over the dog, and patting him on top of the head.

Punishing or “correcting” a dog for offering a deference behavior is the worst thing you can do if you hope to modify the behavior. He will only intensify his deference in a futile attempt to convince you he's being subordinate. In a worst-case scenario, he may even become defensively aggressive if his deference signals aren't working. Instead, ignore the behaviors when they happen, and work to build your dog's confidence in

relationships by being consistently nonthreatening and insisting others do the same. You can also build confidence through positive training; when the dog has a better understanding of how to influence and predict his environment, his confidence will increase.

A dog's deference behaviors may include any or all of the following:

- **Tail tucked** – Dog pulls his tail tightly against his belly to cover and protect his vulnerable underparts. Even dogs with “gay” tails or tails that curl over their backs can do this when sufficiently threatened.
- **Freeze** – Dog ceases all motion as he attempts to convey his submission to the party threatening him – usually in conjunction with averting eyes.



This dog is motionless, signalling his passive submission to his handler in a force-based training class (complete with choke chain – we don't approve of either one). His eyes are averted and his tail tucked.

- **Averting eye contact** – Dog shifts eyes to avoid making eye contact, or actually turns head away.
- **Lowering head and body** – Dog ducks head and/or crouches closer to the ground.
- **“Belly-up”** – Dog rolls over on back and exposes vulnerable underparts. (Can also be a simple invitation for a tummy rub when not accompanied by other deference behaviors.)

- **Submissive urination** – Dog urinates in response to perceived threat (not necessarily an actual threat) in a person's voice, touch or approach.

### Major Misunderstandings Between Primates and Canines

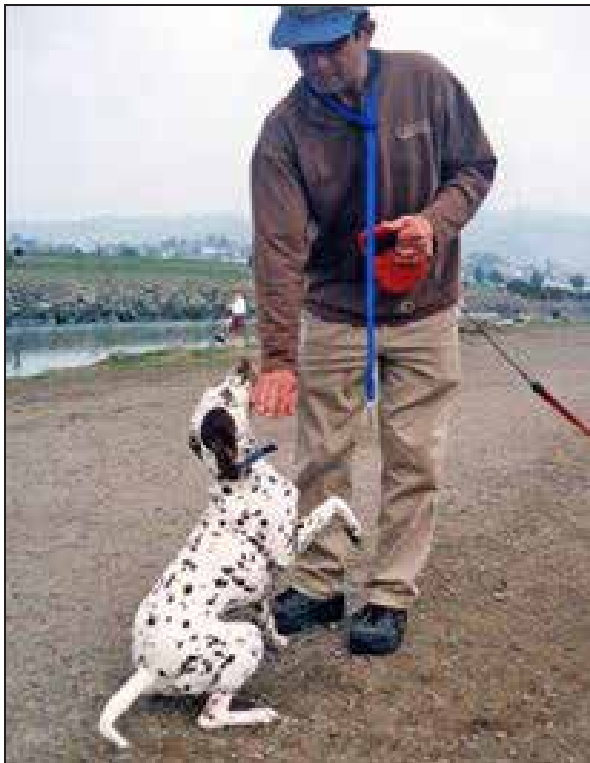
While dogs might be better able to “read” what other dogs are trying to communicate to them, humans have long misunderstood their dogs' submissive behaviors and reacted inappropriately as a result. In many human cultures, failure to make eye contact is a sign of someone who is untruthful, shifty, and sneaky. Similarly, dogs who display submissive behaviors such as averting eyes and lowering body posture (“slinking”) are often perceived as wimpy, cowardly, sneaky, manipulative, guilty, and disobedient – misinterpretations based on our familiarity with primate body language.

Unless wise to the ways of canid communication, humans tend to assume a dog offering lowered body-posture deference behaviors is expressing guilt, when in fact he's only responding to a perceived threat in his human's body language.



When a dog “slinks”, with lowered body posture and averted eyes, she exhibits her deference to you, not guilt.

Sometimes, the more the dog acts guilty, the more righteously angry his human gets, the more submissive (“guiltier”) the dog acts – a lose/lose cycle if there ever was one.



**Using a physical “correction” for attention-seeking behavior such as jumping up often guarantees it will continue.**

Submissive urination is another case in point. Owners who still employ the old-fashioned punishment dog-training paradigm may attempt to physically or verbally “correct” a pup for urinating submissively – the exact wrong thing to do.

A pup urinates submissively in response to a perceived threat, such as the assertive approach of a higher-ranking member of the social group. This is a useful survival mechanism that effectively averts the wrath of most adult dogs, who could otherwise do serious harm to a young subordinate.

Unfortunately, when the higher-ranking member is a human, the behavior (urination) that should avert wrath often initiates or escalates anger in the human. The pup’s response is to urinate more – not less. The human gets angrier, the pup pees more, the human gets even angrier, the pup pees even more in a desperate attempt to turn off the anger – and another lose/lose cycle is born.

## Minimizing Language Barrier Between Human and Canine

Human-dog interactions can be more difficult than dog-dog ones, since our native languages are so different. The good news is that you can learn how to avoid “saying” the wrong thing to a dog. The following photos depict a classic conflict between a canine and a human; the two are strangers and neither really understands what the other is communicating. Similar interactions are played out every day in communities across the country, in which well-intentioned humans do all the wrong things in their efforts to be friendly with dogs. Far too often, the failure of dog and human to understand each other and respond appropriately results in a bite – or several. In the following three photos, can you spot signs of their mutual misunderstanding?



• **Man** – The man is bent over from the waist, directly facing the strange dog, making direct eye contact. He has observed the dog growling and barking at him, and he’s probably saying something like, “Here, boy!”

• **Dog** – Tail is stiffly erect, ears appear pricked forward, the corners of the lips are forward, body posture is tall and forward, and the dog is also making direct eye contact.

## Conclusion

The man would like to meet and greet the dog, and is using appropriate primate body language to do so.

Bending at the waist is a human invitation to come closer. In our culture, a face-front greeting

that includes direct eye contact indicates honesty, friendliness, and sincerity. The man is doing his best to entice the dog to come see him.

However, in the canine world, a full-front, bent-forward posture with direct eye contact is a strongly assertive threat, and the dog is reacting accordingly with defensive aggression. He may not be sure what the man is up to, but he's sure he wants no part of it!



- **Man** – Our human has straightened to full height and is stepping forward, still maintaining direct eye contact with the dog.

- **Dog** – Has moved off to the side, still carrying his tail high and maintaining direct eye contact with the man. His ears are pricked and his mouth appears puckered forward. It's hard to tell for certain because of the angle, but his body posture still appears tall and forward.

### Conclusion

The man has recognized that the dog is rejecting his advances, and is choosing to walk on. He has properly interpreted the dog's aggressive posturing and has wisely given up making friends. While the human's upright posture is less of a threat to the dog than his bent-over position in Photo #1, he is still making direct eye contact.

The stick in his right hand is raised slightly. I'm curious as to whether he's aware he did this – if he made this defensive gesture consciously, or if it was an automatic self-protection response.

The dog is still clearly aroused – keeping his eye on the man and his defenses up to see if the dangerous human poses any further threat.



- **Man** – Has ceased interaction with the dog; walks forward, stick still slightly raised.
- **Dog** – In contrast, the dog continues to engage. He has circled behind the man and continues to show tension in his markedly forward posture, intense stare, and sharply pricked ears.

### Conclusion

While the man appears to have dismissed the unfriendly dog and moved on, the dog isn't yet done with this once-threatening human. Actually, the man is probably at the greatest risk at this moment in the interaction; defensively aggressive dogs are most likely to bite from behind or if cornered, and this dog looks likely to run up behind the man for a stealth attack. Something about the man's posture suggests he may be more aware of the potentially threatening dog than it seems at first glance. Perhaps he belatedly realized that his eye contact was exacerbating the dog's aggression.

Fortunately, this interaction ended without a bite. The man's decision to break eye contact and move on worked. If he's ever in a similar situation again, it might be wiser to stand still, turning slowly if necessary to keep his eye on the dog without making strong direct eye contact, until the dog relaxes and leaves or relaxes enough that the man can leave more safely.

### How You Can Speak Dog Too

Communicating with your dog is a two-way street. While you're teaching her to understand and accept primate language, you can also learn



and use canine body language. This will greatly enhance your relationship and your training program, since your dog can respond very quickly when she realizes you are speaking Dog. It's also a useful skill to have for when you're meeting or interacting with a strange dog.

The following tips on human's body language are applicable when interacting with any dog, but are especially important when dealing with a fearful dog, or any dog who appears worried or unsure about an interaction. Adopt mannerisms and teach others who interact with your dog to do so as well.

**1.** Let the dog come to you. If a dog is frightened, she must be allowed to decide whether or not to approach. It's never a good idea to restrain a dog and force her to accept contact from others. Remember the "fight or flight" response; if the opportunity for flight is taken away, a dog's choices are limited.

**2.** Turn to the Side. Facing a dog directly is more confrontational than keeping your body turned partially or completely to the side; even turning your head to the side will make a frightened or worried dog feel less anxious.

**3.** No staring, please! A direct stare is a threat in the animal kingdom. It is perfectly fine to look at a dog; just soften your expression and don't hard stare directly into her eyes. Do not allow children to put their faces near your dog's face or to stare into her eyes. Adults who insist on direct eye contact with strange dogs also tend to get bitten.

**4.** Don't hover. Leaning over a dog can cause the dog to become afraid and possibly defensive. When we bend over dogs to pet them or to cuddle them, we are unwittingly offering a posture of threat and intimidation.

**5.** Pet appropriately. Approaching dogs by patting then on the head is ill-advised. Envision the interaction from the dog's point of view; a palm approaching from above can be alarming. It's not that dogs should never be petted on top of the head, but that head-patting (or petting over the dog's shoulders, back, or rump) should not be

used as an initial approach. It is wiser to make a fist, hold it under the dog's nose is to allow her to sniff, then pet the dog on the chest, moving gradually to the sides of the face and other body parts, assuming the dog is comfortable. Likewise, a hand moving in quickly to grab for a dog's collar is more potentially fear-inducing than a hand moving slowly to a dog's chest, scratching it, then moving up to take hold of the collar.

**6.** Stoop, don't swoop. Small dogs in particular are often swooped down upon when people want to pick them up. Fast, direct, overhead movements are much more frightening than slow, indirect ones. To lift a small dog, crouch down, pet the dog for a moment, then gently slip your hands under her belly and chest, and lift.

**7.** Watch your smile. While humans interpret a smile as friendly, a dog might not be as fond of seeing your pearly whites. A show of teeth is, after all, a threat in the animal kingdom. Smile at dogs with a closed mouth.

**Understanding Your Dog's Vocalizations**  
**Barks, growls, howls, whines, and whimpers - your dog is talking to you, and he's got a lot to say!**



**This baying hound is speaking his mind; he's seen another dog in the distance and is expressing a challenge. He's also a tad frustrated at not being able to go greet the dog.**

## **Barking**

Dogs bark for many reasons, including alert (there's something out there!), alarm (there's something bad out there) boredom, demand, fear, suspicion, distress, and pleasure (play).

The bark of a distressed dog, such as a dog who suffers from isolation or separation distress or anxiety, is high-pitched and repetitive; getting higher in pitch as the dog becomes more upset. Boredom barking tends to be more of a repetitive monotone. Alert bark is likely to be a sharp, staccato sound; alarm barking adds a note of intensity to the alert.

Demand barks are sharp and persistent, and directed at the human who could/should ostensibly provide whatever the dog demands. At least, the dog thinks so. Suspicious barks are usually low in tone, and slow, while fearful barking is often low but faster. Play barking just sounds . . . playful. If you have any doubt – look to see what the dog is doing. If he's playing, it's probably play barking.

## **Baying**

Baying is deep-throated, prolonged barking, most often heard when a dog is in pursuit of prey, but also sometimes offered by a dog who is challenging an intruder. The scent hounds are notorious for their melodic baying voices.

## **Growling**

Growls are most often a warning that serious aggression may ensue if you persist in whatever you're doing, or what-ever is going on around him. Rather than taking offense at your dog's growl, heed his warning, and figure out how to make him more comfortable with the situation. Dogs also growl in play. It's common for a dog to growl while playing tug – and that's perfectly appropriate as long as the rest of his body language says he's playing. If there's any doubt in your mind, take a break from play to let him calm down. Some dogs also growl in pleasure. Rottweilers are notorious for “grumbling” when being petted and playing, and absent any signs of stress, this is interpreted as a “feels good” happy sound.

## **Howling**

Howling is often triggered by a high-pitched sound; many dogs howl at the sound of fire and police sirens. Some dog owners have taught their dogs to howl on cue, such as the owner howling.

Some dogs howl when they are significantly distressed – again, a common symptom of isolation and separation distress.

## **Whimpering/Yelping**

A whimper or a yelp is often an indication that a dog is in pain. This may happen when dogs play, if one dog bites the other dog too hard. The whimper or yelp is used to communicate the dog's distress to another dog or human when they are friendly. The other dog or human is expected to react positively to the communication. Whimpers can also indicate strong excitement such as when an owner returns at the end of a long workday. Excitement whimpering is often accompanied by licking, jumping, and barking. Whimpering is softer and less intense than whining.

## **Whining**

Whining is a high-pitched vocalization, often produced nasally with the mouth closed. A dog may whine when it wants something, needs or wants to go outside, feels frustrated by leash restraint, is separated from a valued companion (human or otherwise), or just wants attention. It is usually an indication of some increased level of stress for the dog.

## **Speaking Words?**

Some dogs are capable of replicating human speech sounds. When these sounds are selectively reinforced, dogs can appear to be speaking human words, sometimes even sentences. It is most likely that the dogs have no concept of the meaning behind the words they are “speaking” – although as we learn more about canine cognition, one can't ever be too sure.

It's interesting to note that one of the phrases most frequently taught to dogs by their owners is some version of, “I love you...” YouTube provides some entertaining footage of talking dogs!

### **The Good News**

If you think about it, given the stark differences in our communication styles, it's surprising that we get along with our dogs as well as we do! The good news is that both of our species are pretty darned adaptable. We can teach our dogs to appreciate some of our bizarre primate behaviors, and we can learn to use canine body talk to our advantage. When we put it all together, humans and dogs make pretty good teams!

The content of this ebook is based on articles by trainers Nicole Wilde, CPDT-KA, and Pat Miller,

CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA originally published in the *Whole Dog Journal*.

Author/trainer Nicole Wilde, CPDT-KA Nicole Wilde is an author and canine behavior specialist based in southern California. You can find her books, blog and more at [www.nicolewilde.com](http://www.nicolewilde.com).

Author/trainer Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA is *Whole Dog Journal's* Training Editor. She lives in Fairplay, MD, site of her Peaceable Paws training center.