



SAN TAN CANINE TRAINING NEWSLETTER

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Reading Canine Body Language

What Are Dogs Really Saying During Play?

Understanding a dog's body language takes lots of observation and practice. While some of the ways dogs communicate through their body language is overt, much of it is very subtle – difficult to describe and sometimes hard to see in action. But with practice, you can develop a keen eye for body language that will help you read your dog, and the dogs they meet during their play adventures. Here are some things to look for:

INVITATIONS TO PLAY

How can you tell one dog is inviting another to play? Behaviors that say, "Hey, let's play" may include:

- Play bows – when the dog's front legs are lowered and his tail and behind are in the air.
- Pawing at the air.
- Mouth opened in a relaxed "grin."
- Eyes and ears relaxed.

SIGNS OF STRESS AND UNCERTAINTY

Dogs give two very clear signals that may indicate both excitement and stress when meeting another dog:

- Raised hackles – hair standing on end over the shoulders, back or hindquarters.
- A wagging tail.

A wagging tail does not always mean a friendly dog, and raised hackles don't always mean an aggressive dog. Raised hackles and wagging tails can both be signs of nervousness or uncertainty.

"CALMING SIGNALS"

Calming signals are the specific behaviors that dogs use to communicate friendly and non-threatening intentions to other dogs – and even people. When a dog uses calming signals, he can often "calm" a stressed or uncertain dog, settle an excited dog, or appease an aggressive dog. By noticing calming signals, you may be able to tell if the dogs involved in a stressful interaction are actively working toward a peaceful outcome. Some common calming signals include:

- Turning away of the eyes, head, or body
- Moving slowly or in a circle.
- Sitting or lying down.
- Quick licks of the nose.

- Sniffing the ground.
- Yawning.
- Acting distracted or disinterested.
- Freezing in place until the potential for conflict passes.

THREATENING BEHAVIOR DURING GREETINGS

During initial greetings, behaviors that may indicate a threat or challenge include.

- Walking straight up to another dog (rather than approaching slightly from one side).
- Charging.
- Head over the other dog's shoulder during greeting.
- Eyes narrow or a hard stare.
- Ears forward or pinned back.
- Tail straight out or high over the back.
- And, of course, barking, growling, snarling, lunging, and snapping.

THREATENING BEHAVIOR DURING PLAY

When two dogs roughhouse, much of their play mimics "fighting." They make a lot of growling noises. Their teeth chomp at each other's necks. They tackle, roll, and wrestle. So how can you tell when rough play is not a game? Here are a few things to look for:

- Repeated body slamming – a dog ramming another dog with his full body, shoulders, or hips – especially when only one dog is doing the slamming.
- Chasing, cornering, or crowding a dog.
- A group of dogs paying too much attention to or "picking on" one dog..
- A wagging tail.

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Source: *The Whole Dog Journal*