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*Strengthening the Human –
Animal Connection*

Canine Body Language

Dogs, like humans, convey their emotions, thoughts and desires to others by many different means, including olfactory communication (hormones, pheromones), verbal communication and body language. The key to effective communication between two individuals, be they human or canine, is to read and interpret all the cues being provided.

Dogs are masters at reading our body language, so much so, that they outperformed both wolves and chimps in a study designed to test each species' ability to understand our cues. But, are we just as good at reading their cues? Sadly, no. Humans often misinterpret the body language of dogs. A tail wagging doesn't always mean the dog is happy. The exposing of teeth doesn't always mean the dog is being aggressive.

As for dogs reading other dogs' body language, it is not always an even playing field. Dogs actually "learn" much of their code of conduct through interactions with other dogs. The most influential interactions occur when dogs are young. They learn proper dog etiquette from their mother and siblings (if they are left with the litter long enough) and through such experiences as puppy socialization classes. Without these crucial experiences they may not learn that a stare, a yelp, or a lip-lift all mean the same thing, "GO AWAY."

Let's explore the meaning of canine body language cues. A dog's emotional state is revealed through the position of their ears, mouth, face, tail, hair, posture and body position. Individually, each of these body parts could be thought of as words. It is important to put all of the "words" together to understand the meaning of the whole "sentence."

When dogs watch us, they watch our eyes because it is an important means of communicating authority. A dominant dog will stare down a less dominant individual and the more submissive dog avoids direct eye contact by averting its gaze. They may even turn their head to the side to expose their neck. This "Look away" signal can be a sign of anxiety or stress and can also act as a "Calming signal" which is shown to another dog or human, etc as a means of "turning off" any aggression or threat of aggression on the part of the other dog, human, etc.

What does each part of the body tell us?

Erect ears: Alert, confident, Arousal

Ears back: Fear

Ears vertically dropped: Deference, submission, low rank, anxiety

Eyes wide with the whites showing: Fearful

Pupils dilated (eye looks very dark): Arousal, fear, may bite

Staring, hard eye: High arousal, may bite

Squinty eyes: Friendly, relaxed

Mouth/lips/teeth: (Note, in the following illustration, that the submissive grin and the snarl both expose teeth but the meaning of each is completely different.

Mouth slightly open, some tongue showing: Relaxed dog

Tongue hanging out, spatula shaped and "red" +/- drooling: Stressed dog

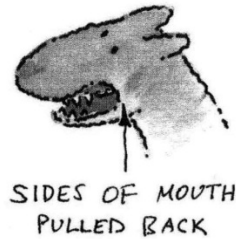
Mouth closed: If brief = ok, but if prolonged (more than 1-2 sec i.e.) = Tense dog, may bite

Submissive grin: (corners of mouth pulled back into over-exaggerated smile) – shows deference/submission. Also called a "fear grimace"

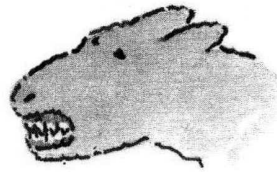
Snarl: (corners of the mouth are forward with lips raised up to show only incisors and canine teeth) – shows confidence; offensive aggression.



FEAR GRIMACE



AGONISTIC PUCKER



• Images courtesy of Sophia Yin, DVM

Licking lips: Appeasement, Concern, Conflicted (distance-decreasing)

Flicking tongue: Anxious (and solicitation of reassurance = "calming signal")

Tail above plane of back: Confident, high status

Tail below plane of back: Less confident, lower status, deference, fear (caution for sight hounds for whom a lowered tail is normal carriage)

Tail level with plane of back: Relaxed, neutral

Tail wag: Willingness to interact (Note here that the willingness to interact may be in a friendly way or an unfriendly way depending on the rest of the dog's body language. Remember, even dogs with wagging tails can bite)

Tail tip wag: stiff: confident, assertive, and offensively interactive

Tail tucked when belly presented: Fear/submission

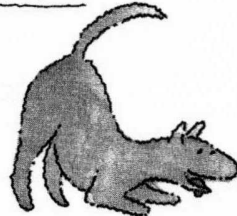
Cosmetic changes, such as tail docking, can alter how the dog expresses his emotions through his tail

Body lowered: Deference, defensive, fear (Note: Holding the head lowered can show fear, deference also)

Body stiff/leaning forward/tail stance: Confidence, Intent to interact (not necessarily aggressive)

Front end of body low with hind end up high: Playful gesture to initiate play; "play bow"

PLAYFUL



FEARFUL



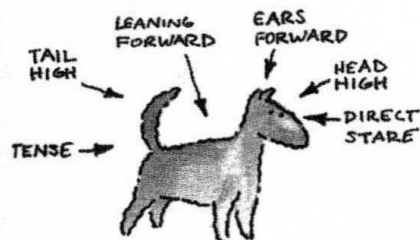
• Image courtesy of Sophia Yin, DVM

Raising forepaw: Distance-decreasing, solicitation of attention, deference (willingly place themselves off-balance)

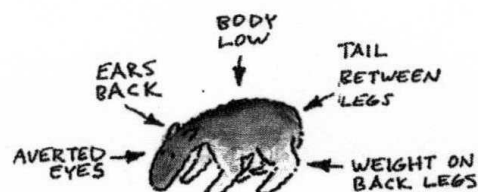
Piloerection (hair raised): Arousal associated with anxiety, fear, or aggression

Piloerection restricted to neck or tail: Confident dog

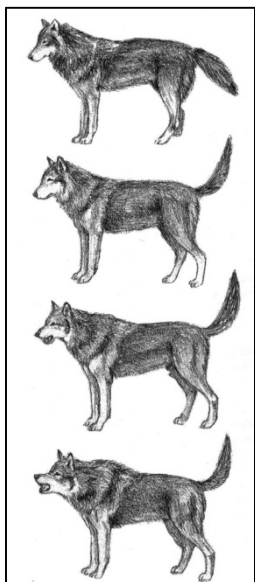
DOMINANT



SUBMISSIVE



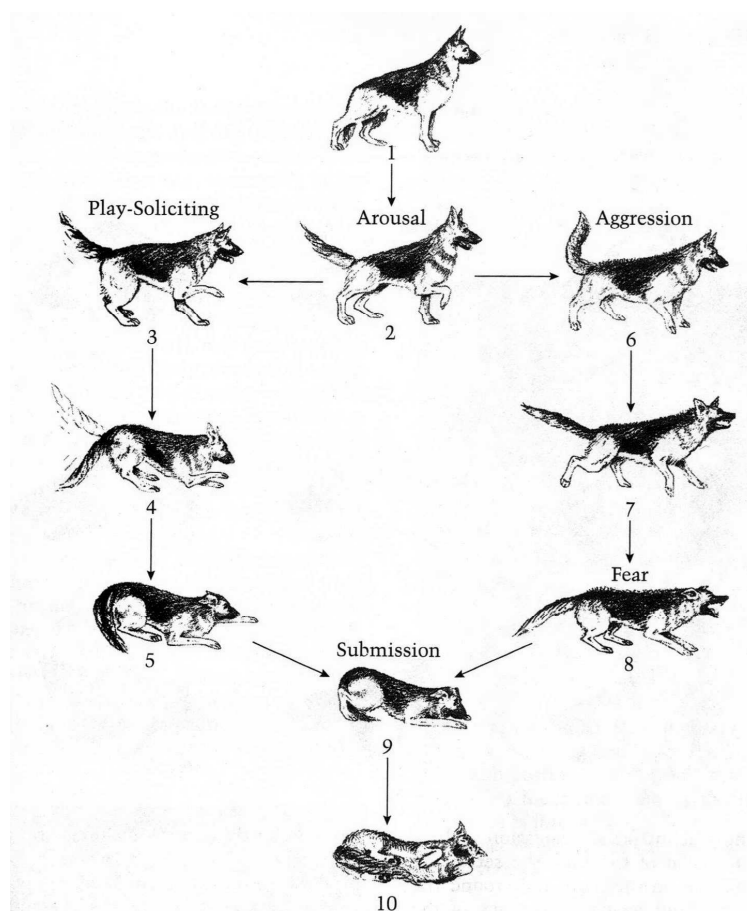
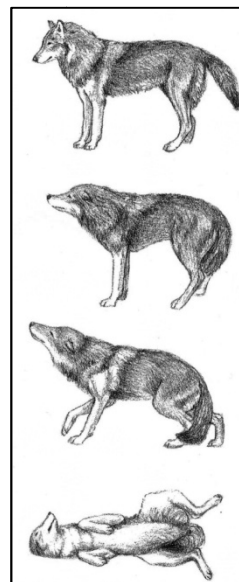
• Image courtesy of Sophia Yin, DVM



*al postures flow
f signals to
dog's mind is
calm and alert to*

Images courtesy of Bruce Fogle, DVM

*This dog's mind is changing from
calm and alert to submissive*



Two Final Thoughts

- Some dogs give conflicting signals (the ears may be saying two different things at the same time). When this happens, it's probably best to listen to the end with the teeth or wait to get a better feel for the dog's emotional state before interacting with the dog.
- Certain breeds may have unreliable signals. Rottweilers, for example, can turn from being calm and content to anger without revealing the emotion change through their body posture.