

**Body Language of Dogs – What is my Dog Saying?**  
**Excerpts from Sarah Kalnajs, The Body Language of Dogs**  
**Turid Rugaas Calming Signals: On Talking Terms with Dogs**  
**Maureen Ross, MA. NCC, CPDT-KA, LTE, Awareness Centered Training - ACT**

Often, we do not recognize signals / body language cues that our dogs give us until it is too late. Dogs, even puppies, consistently learn and give cues all the time. Here are a few to be aware of that can help YOU, as a dog parent, communicate better while living and learning with your dog. Be sure to have a wellness check, ruling out health issues that can exacerbate stress.

**Signs of stress, in context:** Most signs of stress come in sequences or clusters – not individually. It is essential to look at the WHOLE DOG and WHOLE PICTURE.

- **Penis Crowning:** Arousal that can escalate to aggression). Puppies show their penis (lipsticks or rockets)) while sitting. No concern here.
- **Lowered Head:** Use visuals and observe dogs. Not all lowering of the head means the same thing.
- **Teeth Clattering:** Can mean I'm cold, stressed or anxious.
- **Sweaty Paws:** Overheated dogs sweat by panting and through their paws. Excessive sweating may mean an overstressed dog. Look at the whole situation / environment.
- **Lip Licking:** A message of spatial bubble. This dog is nervous – step away, not closer.
- **Tongue Flicking:** Same as Lip Licking – slow and easy – give the dog space.
- **Dilated Pupils,** also known as whale eyes or whites exposed.
- **Tap-Outs:** Classic roll over, not to be confused with a relaxing or comfortable dog. A stressed dog looks uncomfortable, not relaxed. Not all dogs want belly rubs.
- **Bunny Eyes:** Glazed over – nervous – likely to freeze.
- **Freezing:** Dogs becomes still, sometimes stop breathing – be calm, back away.
- **Tucked Tail, Low Tail:** Notice the whole dog. Look at visuals. Some breeds, like Greyhounds, may tuck their tail naturally. You will know the difference.
- **Pacing:** Anxiety or has to pee. What is the situation?
- **Stiff Posture:** An alert stand, assessing the safety of the situation. This dog may not want to engage with you – *back away*.
- **Excessive Shedding:** Health issues aside, out of the blue excessive shedding is stress induced.
- **Over Stretching:** Not the relaxed play bow – upward and downward facing dog.
- **Trembling:** Dog is either cold or anxious. Consider a Thunder Shirt. Tee shirts / coats may help. Be sure to tie the T-Shirt on top so the dog doesn't trip.
- **Muscle Ridges:** In slow motion, this is cool. Muscle's actually tense up. Around the muzzle you can notice the muscles pulsing.
- **Urogenital Check-outs:** A dog may be checking his equipment or using this as a form of displacement – taking a moment to de-stress.
- **Spatial Bubble:** We all have them. So do dogs. Respecting spatial bubbles, taking a few steps (or more) back, redirecting away from what is causing anxiety is best.

**Stress Vocalizations** not to be confused with vocalizations that are natural, alerting, and sometimes calming and fun for dogs.

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- Stress Panting is dry / shallow breathing
- High Pitch Whining
- Happy Panting
- Dry Heavy Panting
- Excessive salivating with panting and whining; clusters that can happen submissive licking and sometimes, urinating.
- Cheek Puffing

**Calming Signals (Turid Rugaas): Dogs use body language and role-modeling to learn how to navigate their way with other dogs.** Some puppies/dogs are not given the chance to learn them. This can block their natural behaviors and cause confusion while interacting with other dogs or even humans. It can become a social deficit, excluding dogs from playing with dogs or going out for walks and dog parks.

- **Yawning:** Watch wolves. One will yawn, then the others do too. Our dogs do this. We can help calm them in stressful situations by yawning. Don't yawn at the dog – simply make sure they are watching you and yawn.
- **Looking Away:** Humans do this when trying to avoid an unpleasant outcome.
- **Sniffing:** Dog's olfactory is more powerful than ours by the millions. They sniff in Technicolor. In context with the situation and behaviorally, dogs enjoy sniffing. It is mentally stimulating for them, and can help to balance energy. Allowing sniffing as a reward is a smart dog parent tool.
- **Sneezing:** Learned sneezing does not count. Snorting / sneezing can be a sign of excitement. Or, they could simply have something in their nasal cavity.
- **Blinking:** A message of not being sure – being very cute. Dog could have something in their eye. Engage, observe, educate yourself and decide for individual situations.
- **Shaking Off:** Natural for most dogs if shaking off water or debris. Excessive shaking can be a serious health issue especially head and ears. The dog could be shaking off stress.
- **Arcing:** The dog chooses to arc away from a perceived stressful situation. Follow the dog's cue. Now is not the time to yank a dog into the situation.

**Sequences, notice clusters of behavior like the following:**

- Sniff / Lip Lick / Shake-Off
- Tail / Tongue Flick
- Look-away, Trembling, Excessive Shedding
- Yawning, Lip Licking, Blinking

**Distance Increasing Signals:** People and dogs have spatial bubbles. DIS is when dogs are trying to increase spatial distance from the stressor. It is the lower level before excitation. They simply try to pull back and move away.

- Sub-Thresholds: Barking / Lunging
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- Barking: Dogs bark for a variety of reasons. It is communication. They bark to send messages, to alert and from boredom. There is an alarming bark and an announcing bark (oh, you are home, hello, or bark, bark, bark, an intruder).
- Reading the signals to recognize thresholds is helpful for trainers/behaviorists and dog parents.
- Pilo-Erection: Puppies and dogs get excited. Generally, it begins with the top hair raising between the shoulders. Observe the tail position and tail. Is it flagging high or low, fast or slow. Is the hair raising all the way down the back? It's time to calmly call or go to your dog, leash-up, and redirect to a calmer position, SIT / Watch-Me.
- High, flagged and tipped tails with a Pilo-Erection is a highly aroused dog warning other dogs or YOU to move away.

***Both dominant and submissive extremes have equal potential  
to become a dog who will bite out of fear.***

**Distance Decreasing Signals:** The opposite of DIS, DDS observes a dog in YOUR SPACE. There can be submissive lip licking, licking you, frontal care-seeking, meet / greet. Basic socialization and manners training that can be easily integrated into daily living will remedy this.

- Submissive (can be submissive urination too)
- Ground scratching
- Freezing
- Panting and pausing (dogs will hold their breath)
- Very brief look-away (dog is unsure and assessing the situation for safety)
- Whale Eyes
- Easy Wagging Tail – Circle Tail (very friendly)
- Play bows (can be submissive, to relieve stress, solicit play or simple to stretch)
- DO NOT PUNISH – this type of dog is already scared. What the dog needs is confidence and social manner training.
- Submissive Grin: No sound, afraid – lips pulled back – not funny. Again, this dog should not be so afraid of people that it has to display “I’m a worm” behavior.

**Marked Signals:** Males and females mark. Dogs leave urine in their bladder, so they can continue marking through-out a walk. Several dogs, usually in confinement, will urinate on each other, then on the urine, then on the surrounding area at different intensities.

- Dogs (wolves) mark territories to protect their pack and warn off predators.
- Domestic family dogs mark for the same reasons.
- Do not confuse this with the meet/greet ritual (circling, sniffing). That is normal and healthy for dogs meeting for the first time.

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**Hard Eyes:** The head is usually turned-away when the human approaches. It's sad. The eyes are whale-eyed, sometimes whites are showing. You can tell, even if you are not an expert. A dog with hard eyes is fearful and anxious. They are warning you to BACK-OFF. So, BACK-OFF. It is a physiological message / signal to GET AWAY FROM ME. DO NOT COME ANY CLOSER. Often, it is accompanied by a low-growl.

- The dog will back-up with hard eyes – while barking
- Forward stance – ears erect and forward too
- Heightened posture (mouthy) or slinking away – both are messages to BACK-OFF

**Soft Eyes:** A dog with soft eyes is usually friendly and may be apprehensive due to previous associations / encounters. A soft eye is distinguishable because it is open, you feel comfortable with the dog. It is a friendly feeling look. Observe the WHOLE DOG / BODY LANGUAGE. Is it slouched, forward, backward, relaxed, excited? Proceed accordingly, slow and easy. Review how to approach / interact with a dog. I recommend the body language charts / sketches of Lili Chin and Dr. Sophia Yin.

**Muzzle Punching:** If you have been muzzle punched – you know it. Your jaw, cheekbones and nose hurt. The dog usually does this so quickly that it takes the best of us by surprise. You may be bent over, sitting, standing – and the dog jumps to greet you with love – knocking the breath out of you. You are clocked. Remedy: teach all dogs to SIT. This is akin to us saying, “MAY I PLEASE?”

**Resource Guarding:** By nature, dogs are resource guarders. RG drives (hard-wired) are stronger in some dogs. Some, unfortunately, are learned. Dogs can resource guard anything from a toy, to the neighborhood, to YOU. Factors may be genetic, colored with nature / nurture. Socialization, desensitization and awareness centered training (for both dogs and dog parents) are essential ingredients, along with guidelines / boundaries in the home and on walks. Children are especially sensitive to this, as they will give dogs too many toys and freedom. Under 12, children must always be supervised with dogs.

**Energy Levels:** Balance them with creative games and training. Give the dog a job to do that s/he can succeed at. Dogs who are reactive have a difficult time learning anything because they are not focused on what you are trying to communicate / teach. Dogs that are responsive are grounded and calm. This requires US to be calm, breathing in nose-to-navel. Teaching dogs in a manner that they understand will resolve and prevent (proactive) behavioral issues in the future.

***Genetics loads the gun; environment pulls the trigger***  
***We make choices as how to nature / nurture our dogs***  
***Awareness, Balance, Relationship, Education, Well-being***

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**Roll-Over versus Tap-Out versus Alpha Roll-Over**

- **Dog rolls** over on his own. The belly is up, eyes calm, tail wagging or calm. Massage/touch is pleasurable, not scary.
- **Tap-Out:** Head is down, body flips, usually slowly into a roll. It can be accompanied with submissive licking. This dog is stressed and trying to submit. The message is “I am a worm, don’t hurt me”. And, you should not. Only a brute would hurt a dog in this posture.
- **Alpha-Rollover:** We know today that there is no such thing for domesticated dogs when coming from humans. A child could be hurt trying to grab a dog, stare them down and flip them over. Dogs know we aren’t wolves or dogs. **In the real world of dogs and wolves, the submissive dog or wolf will roll on their own.** They are not slammed into the ground, unless the other dog is a “BRUTE” with no species related socialization skills or manners.

**Displacement Behaviors:** We all have them. Displacement activity is performed to change the motivation in a situation to escape. The individual tries to achieve a sense of security by performing an activity that feel safe and connects with pleasure.

***DPB Is something you do to look busy when you really do not know what you should be doing. If I don’t see it ... it’s not there.***

**Some forms of DPB** (be mindful that these need to be observed in context – Whole Body)

- Marking territory / Inappropriate increase in activity
- Stretching / Yawning
- Shaking Off
- Sniffing
- Looks-Away

**Is this Play? Is it taught, safe or not?** All dogs should be trained with awareness centered training, socializations and manners. A simple “SIT” is like us saying, “May I please?”. Children should be supervised and taught how to respect the dog and vice-versa. Dogs who have been ignored in formative years (at one they are about 15 years in human behavioral development), develop their own coping skills (healthy or not). One dog in a play bow may be doing just that, while another is getting ready to launch into a muzzle punch.

**Family Systems and Getting to Know the Dog:** Families come in different sizes, cultures and value systems. So do dogs. They have higher and lower ranking motivators, different likes and dislike, and are hard wired more for one behavior than another.

We have more dogs in the USA than ever before. The good news is that we have plenty of available resources on how to, and not, teach our dogs to be good citizens of the community and family members.

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With this abundance of resources comes confusions and sensory overload. Learning to sift out what works and does not is a virtue well worth having. Are we trying too hard with too many resources? Dogs are simple, but with ingrained behaviors and adoption still on the rise, the one factor that will keep dogs in loving homes is *socialization and manners*.

Get to know your dog whether a puppy or adopted adult. Learn their abilities and strengths and use them to your advantage by giving them a job. In *Awareness Centered Training – ACT*, with private coaching clients and in group classes, one of the first hand-outs is *Doggy Diner Training*. Sounds so simple – and it is. **Life rewards** are anything your dog needs and thrives on (food, toys, touch, exercise, love). Feeding your puppy/dog 2X a dog will give you 14 training opportunities to teach watch-me, sit, down, stay, wait, gentle – OKAY, here is a piece of food. Dogs eat in about a minute – so even in today’s multi-tasking, high energy world, this begins a strong foundation easily and joyfully.

Dog trainers / behaviorist are abundant. They use a variety of methods to teach, some better than others. The goal, as in pet therapy dog training, is to teach for reliability, predictability and confidence. The dog should LOVE training. Desensitization to a variety of sights, sounds, smells and environments can begin early in a gentle way for ALL DOGS.

One thing we trainers / behaviorists know is too often dog parents wait too long to begin training. Knowing what we know today about behavioral development of dogs, it is true that a 1-year-old dog is behaviorally equivalent to a 15-year-old teenager.

Learning for pups begins in the whelping box. They transition to families and need time to acclimate. Dogs will learn whether we train them or not, so it benefits us to begin with early, gentle training teaching pups how to integrate into a human household.

Training our dogs can change our lives. Living and learning with dogs is a gift.

Enjoy the journey with your dog(s) allowing them to be individuals while learning with kindness and understanding.