Understanding Canine Body Language

The giving and interpreting of sign language is innate in dogs. Dogs have an exceptionally vast supply of many forms of expression and have advanced far beyond their wild ancestors in their capacity to develop new forms of social organization and communication. They use their bodies and facial expressions to communicate their intentions to all around them.

While they may not be able to speak as we do, they offer us very comprehensive communication through their body gestures. Paying careful attention to their eyes and pupils, the carriage of their tails, their facial tension (particularly forehead and muzzle areas) you will be able to assess whether the dog is friendly or fearful and whether or not he is dominant or submissive. Studying the various signals that make up the dog’s language, enable you to better understand the messages he is trying to convey. A basic understanding of this language will aid in deepening the bonds of friendship with your canine companion.

**Body Postures**

**Posture:** As a general barometer, a dog whose body is low to the ground and pulled back indicates a worried and/or submissive emotional state. A dog whose body is held high and leaning a bit forward is expressing confidence and interest. Another good indicator is the fluidity of how your dog moves. Are his movements stiff or loose? If a dog is relaxed and centered, he will walk with a fluid gait. Dogs who are on alert or tense have a tendency toward stiffness in the limbs when they walk. It is interesting to watch your dog’s body language as he meets other people or dogs; and be sure to watch the other dog’s body language as well!

Gestures are body positions and movements that convey a message. Following are a few specific examples of canine body postures and what they mean see how many you can guess correctly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Dog Whose Body Is Showing:</th>
<th>Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Head erect</td>
<td>Neutral and Relaxed Behavior – this is a calm and relaxed dog who can generally be safely approached.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ears up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tail relaxed and wagging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mouth relaxed and slightly open</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weight evenly distributed over all four feet</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*AHSS: Understanding Canine Body Language*  
*Rev. January 10, 2007*
# Understanding Canine Body Language

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Ears up and forward
- Eyes large and hard staring
- Muzzle tense, lips lifted to display teeth
- Tail up, bristled, stiff wag
- Stiff legged, weight over front legs

**Arousal** – This dog has been stimulated by something in his environment. When the dog is excited by something pleasurable, the hackles will be down and the tail will be carried a little lower and will loosely wag. The muzzle will be relaxed and the tongue may be seen. This posture may be displayed to subordinates in order to express a higher ranking pack position.

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Ears erect and tilted forward
- Eyes staring
- Lips curled
- Teeth bared and snarling
- Charging, weight forward
- Tail stiff and raised
- Rear hackles may be up

**Aggressive Attack** – This threatening posture is used to chase another away, or, if need be, to attack in order to protect possessions, pack or self.

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Ears back
- Eyes half closed and blinking
- Mouth nearly closed, tongue tip darts out
- Raised paw
- Tail hangs low, slow wag

**Active Submission** – This pacifying posture is used when a dog acknowledges another dog or human's higher social ranking or to inhibit another’s aggression.

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Ears back, pupils dilated
- Muzzle tense, wrinkled and snarling, teeth exposed
- Tail down and tensed
- Posture mildly crouched, weight over rear legs
- Shoulder hackles may be up

**Defensive Aggression** – When fearful, a dog will give warning signals to indicate he does not wish to be approached. If unheeded, he will bite to protect himself.

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Ears back
- Lying on back, belly exposed
- Tail tucked, release of urine droplets
- Head turned away, indirect gaze

**Passive submission** – Bellying up indicates surrender, a pacifying gesture offered to a more dominant or aggressive individual.

There are also some interesting dog-to-dog interactions to consider. When dog meets dog, they signal their status in relation to each other. Actions like raising a forepaw, looking away, licking or nudging at the other’s muzzle or bowing with the forelegs are all submissive gestures. Mounting, raising up stiffly on one’s toes or placing one’s head over another’s withers (the place where the neck meets the back) indicate the more dominant individual of that interaction. Let’s look at a few dog-to-dog or mother-to-puppy interaction scenarios:

A Dog Whose Body Is Showing: Is Probably Exhibiting This Behavior:

- Mother snarls and places mouth around muzzle or head of puppy

**Maternal Correction** – A mother dog will discipline her pup with a quick muzzle grasp. The
• Puppy submits by flattening to the ground and whimpering with tucked tail and paw raised  
  pup learns to offer submissive body postures.

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<td>• Ears up</td>
<td>Play Solicitation – The play bow is a combination of dominant and submissive gestures. It is offered to invite another to play or as part of courtship behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eyes soft</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mouth open and relaxed,</td>
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<tr>
<td>tongue exposed</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Front end lowered onto</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>elbows, ready to leap</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tail up, loosely wagging</td>
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<td>• Ears back</td>
<td>Greeting Behavior - A submissive dog may greet a more dominant dog with a muzzle nudge as an appeasement or pacifying gesture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eyes semi-closed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tail down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Raised front paw</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nudges mouth area of other dog, may lick or tongue flick</td>
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<td>• Dog #1 – Ears and tail up, forward and alert in the more dominant dog</td>
<td>Greeting Posture – Dogs sniff each other’s genital region when greeting to gather information on sexual status.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dog #2 – Ears back on the more submissive dog</td>
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**Tail:** The tail is one of the best barometers of canine mood and it is the place to which most people look when assessing a dog’s temperament. Of course, the sight of a friendly dog’s wagging tail, widely sweeping from side to side, is what we all want to see. A dog’s tail that is wagging "low" is usually also the sign of a friendly dog. However, the tail can also apprise us of other types of emotions a dog may be experiencing. And the “type” of tail is an important consideration as well. Animals who have tails curling over their backs are unable to lower them so while the tail is a wonderful signal for us in terms of canine behavior, it is always a good practice to look at the entire body of the animal when we are trying to determine if the animal is friendly.

In addition, it is important to watch exactly “how” the tail is wagging to get the full picture of the emotional state of the dog. Not every “wag” is a friendly one. A stiff, raised tail, or one that seems to have a shiver or a wag in the middle, is more a sign of excitement and not at all a friendly pose. Cautious, submissive or fearful dogs will tuck their tails between their legs up against their abdomen. This is a clear signal that the dog is not comfortable with something in the immediate environment.

**Fur:** Many of us have observed dogs with raised “hackles” which is when the hair between the dog’s shoulders becomes erect. We may see this when a dog is distressed. But other dogs may exhibit this when confronted with something unusual in his environment. Just as goose bumps may be unique to the human experiencing them, raised hackles may mean different things.
to the dogs experiencing them. Clearly, it is a sign of an emotion being raised. Some dogs also exhibit raised hackles near their tail. This is typically more significant than the hackles raised at the shoulders and may indicate significant fear or aggression.

**Facial Expressions**

![Facial Expressions](image)

**Ears:** While a dog’s ears are wonderful indicators of behavior, they are a bit harder to read because there are so many different types! Regardless of the size, shape or type, however, they all function in the same way and they all are very powerful receptors of sound as the swivel back and forth like amazing antennae. It’s easy to see erect ears move forward attentively or backward against the head when a dog exhibits fear. It is far more difficult, however, to note this important behavioral cue in a dog with long hanging ears as such moves tend to be far more subtle in appearance.

**Eyes:** These “windows to the soul” can provide significant information about the emotional state of the dog. When a dog’s pupils are very large, it is an indicator that the dog is in a state of stress and perhaps nervous or excited. On the other end of the scale, a content and calm dog will show pupils that are tiny pinpoints. Always be on the lookout for what is referred to as the “whale eye”. This is when the whites of the dog’s eyes flash repeatedly. Contrary to a calm dog who will typically move his entire head to one side or the other to look at something, a stressed or frightened dog will hold his body still and dart his eyes quickly. This looking out of the corner of the eye exposes the whites of the eye and makes it easy to observe “whale eye.”

We spoke earlier about how an enlarged pupil indicated stress, but when that pupil becomes so large that you almost cannot see the iris for the size of it, it is best to remove the dog from the area immediately and seek out a place where he can calm down and reduce his stress.

**Mouth:** The dog’s mouth and cheek area are wonderful indicators of behavior that are frequently overlooked. Of course, we always notice a dog’s expression if there are bared teeth protruding from tightly lifted lips. However, there are also very subtle nuances that will tell us volumes about the dog’s emotional state; the corners of your dog’s mouth are a particularly telling indicator.

If a dog’s mouth is relaxed and kind of slacked, then it is a good bet that the dog is calm and centered. However, a frightened dog on alert will frequently pull back the corners of the mouth stretching the lips into sort of a grimace. It appears as a tight, tense facial appearance. A small, almost puckered mouth is the sign of a confident dog. A growling dog with a wrinkled muzzle and bared teeth may be signaling an impending bite.

**Vocalizations**

Dogs have a different vocal apparatus from humans. The position of the tongue is not as important as it is in human speech. While body language is the primary mode of communication among dogs, vocalizations play an essential role in delivering the desired message. It is said that while humans have an endless number of ‘sounds’ associated with communications, dogs have approximately ten. Some of the more common of those vocalizations include:

**Barking** – The most common of all the canine communications, barking can have any number of meanings. Dogs may resort to a bark to warn their family of a visitor; they may bark to greet their family members or when playing with another dog or
simply when anxious about something or bored. Those who study their companion animal’s behavior will learn to distinguish the different tones in their dog’s barks; this will go a long way to determining what your dog is trying to say!

**Whining** – Frustration and/or anxiety are usually what prompt whining in your canine companion. You may hear whining particularly when your dog wants something or wants to do something that he is being prevented from doing, such as going outside, being fed or is unable to reach a toy or another friend with whom to play. Some dogs will whine when left alone or when confronted with a situation that inspires anxiety or fear such as a trip to vet’s office.

**Growling** – Frequently the precursor to a bite, growling is the vocalization of choice when a dog wants to clearly communicate a loud and clear warning of aggression. Territorial challenges by other dogs or unwelcome strangers, both human and animal, may also prompt growling. Dominant dogs may attempt to growl at owners to test the waters of who is “top dog” in the house! This is, however, a significant behavioral problem that warrants contacting a reputable animal behaviorist immediately. Growling must always be taken seriously!

**Howling** – While some dog breeds have a tendency to howl more than others, dogs who howl when left alone are actually “calling” for their “pack members” to come back to them; they are saying, “I am alone. Where is my family?”

By paying close attention to your dog’s body language, you’ll learn to understand what your canine is trying to tell you, while strengthening the bond between you and your pet!

For additional information, please visit [www.azhumane.org](http://www.azhumane.org)

Some sections adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the ASPCA

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