



# Body Language

## What is your dog telling you?

Dogs can be wonderfully expressive, using their whole bodies to show each other, and us, how they are feeling! Picture a puppy bounding about with their favourite toy – sheer bliss! Understanding how your dog communicates with you means you'll be able to recognise when they're feeling confident and happy, as well as times when they might be feeling worried or frightened. You'll learn more about your dog and be able to react appropriately to keep them feeling safe and secure. They'll appreciate your support, trusting you to be there for them and help them make good decisions in different situations.

This is really important, because once a dog learns which actions work out well for them in different situations, they will behave that way again the next time they find themselves in a similar situation – so if a dog learns that politely turning his head and blinking works to communicate that they're a little unsure and don't want to interact then they'll do this next time, however if they learn that lunging and barking worked really well in making another dog or person go away and leave them alone, well then that's exactly what they'll do next time they feel worried again!

## Some dogs find communication extra hard!

### Appearance

Dogs are such an incredibly diverse species in terms of the sheer number of breeds that exist, as well as crossbreeds too! But sometimes the way a dog looks can have an impact on their ability to communicate, and give them extra challenges! Think about dogs who are very fluffy, or of a dark coat colour for example – other dogs and people can't easily detect very small movements in their faces and muscles as easily as they can in dogs with short, pale fur. Some breeds have coats that are extra wrinkled so again this means they're not necessarily able to move their faces and bodies in the same way as other breeds. And some might have very tightly curled tails, while others don't have tails at all! Some ears sit up high on the head so any movements are very easily observed, while others might flop down low to the ground heavily, so movement is not as obvious!

## Experiences

We know that the experiences a puppy has prepare them for adult life, so if they have had lots of chances to have had nice times with dogs of different breeds, shapes, sizes and colours then they'll have had lots of opportunity to learn how these different types of dogs communicate. However, if they haven't had this opportunity – and it is unlikely that every puppy would ever be able to meet every other variety of dog! – then they might naturally struggle sometimes, just as we humans do with different accents speaking the same language as us!

It can also be hard for dogs when they've had a bad experience with a particular type of dog, because they then might worry that every dog who reminds them of that time will frighten them again! This will make them feel vulnerable and they might be more likely to try to avoid certain situations or express themselves using behaviour aimed at making other dogs leave them alone!

## Understanding the situation is key...

It can be difficult for us humans to interpret our dog's communications because **many of their actions can have lots of different meaning, depending on the situation in which our dogs show them!** For example, a dog who is drooling and licking their lips – this is a perfectly normal bodily response to their dinner being prepared and the anticipation of getting to eat it! However if they begin drooling and licking their lips when they have been lifted into the car these actions might show that they are feeling worried about the expected car journey!

It always helps to consider the circumstances and situation in which our dog is behaving in a certain way, in order to understand what they are trying to tell us and respond accordingly - to give them what they need at that moment! If we learn how to recognise what different postures and actions mean, then we can respond in a way that helps our dog to remain feeling safe, rather than risk them feeling vulnerable. This will also help to keep you, your dog and your family safe!

## Always look at the whole dog!

Although dogs can move many parts of their body in different ways – a tail can be held up high for example, or tucked right between the legs – it is important that we look at the whole body to learn as much information as we can before trying to interpret how our dog might be feeling. This is also why it's difficult to tell from photographs and pictures, because these only capture a snapshot in time and things can change very quickly indeed! A lot of dog communication is also very subtle indeed and so easily missed – it's best to practice using video or watching dogs themselves!

**“I'm happy, relaxed and confident! You're welcome to come and interact with me”**

Dogs that are calm and confident will have relaxed facial muscles so the skin on their faces will be loose without any tension. Their bodies will also be loose and move freely. Their mouths are

likely to be held open and their tongue may loll out casually! Their eyes are likely to be rounded without the white part showing and their ears should be held in a neutral position – so just flopping down loosely in long-eared breeds for example. Tails should also hang loosely – neither tucked in tightly or held very straight upright!

Calm and confident, relaxed dogs should be interested in what is happening around them but able to remain settled regardless, and responsive to their owners.

## “I’m starting to become unsure and worried about something and I need you to help me out!”

When dogs start to become cautious because they are worried about something within their immediate surroundings, their behaviour is aimed at communicating to us and each other that they need a little more space between themselves and whatever it is they are unsure about. So when we see any of these signs we need to stop what we’re doing and think what it might be that is causing our dog to behave in this way and how can we make our dogs feel better. This might mean turning away from someone approaching or something worrying in the distance or it might mean leaving our dogs alone and stopping our interaction with them – as it might be that it is us touching them that is making them feel unsure!

Many of these actions are very subtle and often happen very quickly so we can easily miss them! It pays to be very observant so if you are keen to learn more about your own dog’s personal communication style then **have a friend film you and your dog** - perhaps when out on a walk if this is where they appear to become worried, so you can look again for these very small behaviours!

As dogs become unsure about something, they tend to slow down as they try to learn more about it so they can decide whether they’re right to be concerned. The muscles of the face become tighter, so you should see your dog’s brow furrow with the skin between their ears wrinkling and their ears be held further back and closer against the head than usual. Mouths will also become tighter, tense and close - and you might see a tongue flicking out or repeated licking of the lips that is completely unrelated to hunger. Similarly, you might also see yawning that is unrelated to tiredness.

Dogs can find making direct eye contact intimidating and impolite so you might see your dog turning their head away from whatever is troubling them, and they might narrow or blink their eyes. However as they become increasingly worried you might see them start to stare – too worried now to look away – and so the whites of their eyes will become much more obvious than usual.

You might also see dogs lifting one of their paws up when they’re becoming unsure about something – this is an obvious sign to another dog (or person!) that they are making themselves vulnerable so they do not wish to get involved in anything at this point thank you! A dog might also become very tense within their body and appear to stiffen as their muscles tighten, and they might either tuck their tail right between their legs – in an attempt to look as small and insignificant as possible – or to hold it straight upright so that other dogs (and people) can’t miss the fact that they are saying they’re unsure! Remember, every dog’s communication will be unique, just as ours is! For example, some dogs will lower themselves to the ground while

others might appear to stand bolt upright - again it all depends on the situation and the individual dog!

You might see your dog give a full-body shake! Think about what was happening immediately before they did this, as it is likely that it was an experience they found challenging and are now 'shaking it off!' and letting it go! This is good to know because you can prepare for the next time you have to take your dog to that type of environment and take some extra tasty treats for them to build a more positive association with being in that situation!

Your dog might also repeatedly approach and then retreat from something that they are unsure about – because they are curious and want to investigate but then very quickly lose confidence and back away.

Some dogs will start to pant – completely unrelated to temperature or exercise – and might pace or be unable to stay still or settle down. They might be very easily startled or jumpy. Unsure dogs might also appear to tremble or shiver, when they are not cold.

Your dog might become suddenly very active and seek attention from you by jumping up, pawing at you or even mouthing or mounting when they wouldn't normally. They might find it very difficult to follow well-known words like "sit" because the action of stress hormones, developing inside their body in response to whatever is worrying them, will make it difficult for them to stay still or concentrate. They might move away or actively try to avoid whatever is worrying them. You might find that they grab a treat from your hand now when they would usually take it gently!

And some dogs just won't take any treats at all when they're becoming increasingly worried! If you see any of these signs in your dog then stop whatever you're doing and help your dog out by calmly moving them away from whatever might be causing them to feel unsure. If it is your own interaction with them, then stop and let them relax. If someone else is handling them then politely ask them to stop and explain that your dog is just a little unsure and needs a break.

Recognising these first signs of anxiety will allow you to manage potential situations of conflict and help your dog avoid the things that scare them. This will help prevent the development of more established fears and the risk of aggression, keeping everyone in the family, including your dog, feeling safe.

**"I need space now! I just want to be left alone or to get away from whatever is threatening me"**

As dogs become increasingly worried and frightened by something their behaviour might become less subtle and more obvious for us to become aware of!

Some dogs will make very obvious attempts to hide or withdraw as a clear signal that they do not wish to become involved in any situation or interaction. For some dogs this means retreating to the nearest place where they can feel safe, however for other dogs this might mean bolting and running away, perhaps even all the way home! Which of course can be

highly dangerous, so if you are worried that your dog bolts away when frightened please seek professional support and, meanwhile, keep them on-lead during exercise making sure their lead/collar/harness are fully-functioning!

In a very obvious attempt to demonstrate that they are absolutely not open for interaction, some dogs will roll onto their back and expose their stomachs completely. Their bodies are usually stiff as they do so and their tails tucked firmly up between their legs. (This is very different from a dog who has learned to enjoy having their tummy rubbed – they'll be lying on their backs with their tongues lolling out, tail-swishing from side to side and pawing at you to 'do it again' when you stop!). You'll also see that their faces are tense and tight. The whites of their eyes might show, or they might blink and squint, and they are likely to hold their ears right back and have their tongue flicking out or be licking their lips.

Where a dog is feeling very threatened by something that is coming closer and closer, they might lunge forwards and even growl, bark and snap at whatever it is. Dogs do this in an attempt to frighten the scary thing into going right away and leaving them alone! **Our 'Reactive Dog' handout has lots of useful advice to help if your dog behaves in this way.**

Some dogs might become very worried if they are approached when they have something they find very enjoyable and therefore very valuable indeed – this might be a favourite toy, their dinner, a chew or even an object or a person! You will see all the signs of worry when they are with their treasured item! The best thing to do is to move right away and try to distract them away instead – if you need to interact with them at all! **Our 'Guarding Prevention' hand-out has lots of useful advice to help if your dog behaves in this way.**

## **If a dog feels they have no other choice then they might use aggression as a tactic to make themselves feel safe**

Dogs are naturally very social and co-operative so the last thing on their minds is becoming aggressive in any situation, and they don't generally set out to behave in this way! Aggression is certainly a risky business, because if you aggress towards something, well then it might just as well become aggressive back to you in return!! Someone is going to get hurt and it might easily be you!

However, if dogs feel as though they have no other choice of how to behave to make themselves feel safe again, then they are likely to use aggression as a risky last resort! When they become aggressive it's usually a clear sign that they're really frightened and feel under direct threat! It's important to remember though that not all scared dogs will become aggressive, and may never take this risky step, but that it is a normal part of communication for dogs.

Dogs are likely to become very tense, they might even freeze and move very slowly. They could then growl or snarl and might wrinkle their muzzle or lips back to show their full set of teeth – the only thing they have left to do at this point is to bite! However even at this point a dog might still try to avoid biting by giving a warning 'air-snap'!

**We must neither discourage nor ignore any signs that any dog is becoming more and more uncomfortable in any situation!** This might teach a dog that there is no point in them growling or showing their teeth, because it doesn't work! So next time they'll feel no other option than to bite straight away!

The more we can show our dogs that we understand and respect how they are feeling, and will manage the situation on their behalf in order to keep them feeling safe and secure, then the less likely they are to need to growl in uncertainty and fear when the world starts to worry them. And the more they can trust us to help them out!

If your dog shows any of these signs then stop what you are doing immediately or make sure that whatever or whoever your dog is frightened of is removed as far from them as possible so that they can relax again – but be mindful that this might take a while if they're still very worried!

## **"I'm trying to find a way to cope"**

When dogs try to find a way to cope with situations they are finding challenging they might perform behaviours which are usually seen under other, more appropriate, circumstances. For example, having an itch is an appropriate circumstance for a dog to stop what they are doing and have a good old scratch! However, lots of dogs might suddenly stop, sit down and start scratching with intensity when something in their surroundings is worrying them! Does your dog stop and start scratching on the way into the vet room for example?

Other activities dogs do when they're trying to find a way to make themselves feel better within any situation include sniffing about, licking themselves repeatedly, and biting their nails – a behaviour we humans might relate to!

## **"I'm just not coping at all"**

There are often clear signs when dogs are unable to cope with their circumstances. These might include going to the toilet in response to specific situations rather than to a natural urge to toilet, because the body is trying to get itself in the best position possible to deal with danger so getting rid of any waste products helps!

Dogs who aren't able to cope might also show repetitive behaviour such as continual spinning in circles, bouncing up and down, chasing their tails or shadows, and licking or chewing themselves until they make themselves sore and carrying on even when it hurts. A dog in a kennel, or crate, who is not coping might repeatedly bite the bars for example. Dogs can also become destructive and need to chew and rip things up – they're not thinking about what those things are so they don't care if it's the sofa even, they just need to do something to try to feel better!

Dogs behave in these ways because they are compelled to try to do something to make themselves feel better, and these behaviours might actually do this at the very start! However, the longer they continue the more dangerous it becomes for the dog, who might actually do themselves harm in the longer term. Any dog behaving in this way and unable to cope with their current situation will benefit from professional support so always consult your vet first, to make

sure there isn't a medical reason for the worrying behaviour, and then a qualified and experienced behaviourist.

And just sometimes a dog might lose all their confidence and completely withdraw, reluctant to do anything or respond to any attempt to gain their attention – some dogs might appear to stop behaving altogether! They might appear to just lose interest in the world around them, trying to completely avoid all attempts made by anyone to interact with them. If you feel that your dog is starting to withdraw and has lost interest please contact a professional for advice.

## **In summary...**

Context is key – think about how your dog behaves in particular places and types of interaction.

Take the whole of your dog's body into account and remember that they can sometimes be caught between feeling different emotions at the same time, for example flitting between curiosity and cautiousness.

If your dog starts to appear worried about any interaction – whether this is between yourself and your dog, or another person or animal – STOP this interaction right away and calmly remove your dog to a place where they are able to relax again.

A frightened dog might feel they have no other option than to become aggressive to make themselves feel safe again, so always act immediately to make your dog feel safe as quickly and calmly as possible. **Professional help is available should you feel you and your dog need some extra support.**

**If your dog is almost always likely to show a fearful reaction to certain situations - and remember that as well as trying to retreat and avoid, a frightened dog might also appear aggressive - we recommend contacting your vet to rule out any possible medical reason for this, and then seeking help from a professionally qualified and experienced behaviourist.**

**Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.  
If you need help for your Dogs Trust Dog please email: [reception@dogstrust.ie](mailto:reception@dogstrust.ie)**

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