Dog-Speak

Recognizing Stress Signals

Dogs "talk" to us all the time–but what are they saying? Though dogs certainly bark, they primarily communicate through non-verbal signals that are often fleeting and hard to catch. Noticing and accurately interpreting dog body language is key to understanding how a dog feels and what he is trying to communicate.

Start by observing. It takes practice to become good at spotting more subtle canine body language and lower-level signs of stress. Look often at the details of every body part from the mouth to the tip of the tail. What does your dog look like when relaxed? How does that change when he is happy or excited? Anxious or scared? Conflicted? Ready to play? Not interested in petting? Tired? Hungry?

Below is a list of lower-level stress signals that people commonly miss or misunderstand. If you see one, your dog may need your help. Becoming adept at reading dogs will guide you toward better decisions that keep your dog safe and happy, and help you stop trouble before it starts.



Mouth closed tight



Eyes unusually round



Ears tip backward



Tail points downward



Head/body turn away



Back round, head low



Yawning (not tired)



Whites of eyes show



Ears drop down, back



Tail tucks under body



Avoids eye contact



Whole body tense

CHALLENGE: Select one of the signals above and watch for it in different situations. Are you surprised at when you see it or how often it occurs? Can you change the situation next time to reduce your dog's stress or prevent it altogether?

Written by: Lisa Bert, Fingers and Paws Dog Training, CPDT-KA

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Establish a Routine for a New Dog/Puppy

Like humans, dogs find comfort in routine. Predictability creates confidence, so have a regular daily schedule. Introduce friends and family slowly–have them toss treats to the dog to build pleasant associations. Treat or play around new objects like household items and in new environments. And have fun! Playing, feeding, walking and interacting with your new dog builds a lasting bond.



Establish a routine. Stick to the same time for play, walks, meals, departures and arrivals.

Begin positive reinforcement training in your home. Say "yes" to your dog with small food rewards when he does things you like.



Create a place for your dog. Dogs need time to themselves, too. Provide a comfy spot with a bed, toys and water.

Shift calories out of the food bowl and use them for minute-long training sessions or teaching polite walking skills. The harder a behavior is for a dog, the tastier the food should be.



Keep your dog's world small for the first few months. Provide short, positive, controlled introductions to new people, places and things.

Allow your dog to decide whether to solicit petting from someone–never force an interaction. Many dogs don't like to be touched by unknown people.

Doggy introductions can be stressful. Many dogs are dog selective. After all, do you like everyone you meet? Leash greetings can be uncomfortable. Avoid these meetings until you learn more about your dog's stress signals.

Always focus on reinforcing behaviors you like. Punishment may suppress behaviors, but it is not fixing the underlying cause, and has many risks.

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Decompression

Thank you for adopting! Here are some tips to help get you and your new family member off to a good start.

Your new family member–let's call him "Buddy"–has been living in a shelter. He is stressed from the experience and needs time to decompress and settle into your home. What Buddy needs right now is a calm and quiet place to relax.

Provide a safe and comfortable space, preferably a crate. You may reward Buddy when he is in his crate with treats or something like a food-stuffed toy filled with banana and peanut butter. Give him space and let him rest.



Buddy may need a week or two to decompress. He may need more time. That is okay; be patient.

Allow Buddy to explore your home with you, one room at a time, on a leash. Allow him time to sniff and learn about his new home. Show him where his food and water are located. Show him his crate; if he wants to go in it, let him. Then give him some time to himself.

Be patient. Give Buddy some time. Soon, he will realize that he has hit the jackpot.

Now is not the time to put social pressure on Buddy. There is no need to visit the pet store or have friends and family over for a visit.

Supervise him. When you're not able to watch Buddy at the moment, have him go to his crate until you can. He doesn't know that garbage cans, kitchen counters, and shoes are off limits yet. You want to set Buddy up for success, so eliminate opportunities for him to do things you don't like.

Keep Buddy on a leash when he's in your yard–even if it's fenced in. He could be a fence jumper or hide in the bushes. More than likely, he is not going to come when you call him. You want to make it easy for Buddy to do the right thing.

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Rules to Grow By

Safe Interactions for Dogs and Children

Dogs have to learn a lot to live in our world. They come equipped with canine instincts, not an understanding of human expectations and communication. Establishing appropriate boundaries for people as well as dogs minimizes the risk of miscommunications, builds mutual respect and trust, and develops relationships. This is important even in households with no children, and with ANY dog, not just the family dog!

It's important to model behavior with dogs that we know will be safe for anyone. The child that frequently sees an adult scooping up a small dog may try to do the same, which can be scary for the dog and unsafe for both. Children can also be unpredictable, fast, noisy, moody–which can be stressful for even the calmest dog! At these times, the best boundaries are physical: divide a room with a gate, have dogs and kids in separate rooms with the doors closed, or put the dog in his crate or a pen.



Let a resting dog be



Don't lay on the dog



Let dog eat in peace



Let dog enjoy a chew



Respect dog's space



Hug humans, not dogs



Let dog walk away



Give scared dogs space



Don't run near dogs



Let dog come to you

Teach your dog manners and he'll be comfortable in our world. Set boundaries to prevent behaviors you don't want, then focus on reinforcing behaviors you DO want. Be patient and respect the dog's needs and you'll build a wonderful lifelong bond.

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