

## Canine Communication: Body Language in your Dog



Do you know what Felix is trying to communicate?

Dogs have many methods of communication, some of which are obvious and well known, such as growling, tail-tucking, and barking. However, as your dog's guardians, do you know what Fido is trying to tell you when he yawns? Or how about when you are telling him to do something and he seems to be looking everywhere but directly at you? Or lastly, how about when he shakes his whole body off, as if he is wet when he's not?

The above examples are all methods of communication either to a person, another dog, or even to himself. Many of these signals are known as calming signals. There are many types of calming signals. Some are meant as distance-increasing, a dog's way of telling the other party that he needs some space. Some are cut-off cues, your dog's way of needing a time out. Others are just your dog's way of coping with minor to moderate to severe stress or competition and these signals often come far sooner than the more obvious growl or bite. As a general rule, these calming signals are meant to do just that. They are meant to calm the situation, the other person/dog, or themselves. Depending on the situation and the environment, these signals become your cue as your dog's guardian to address what might be stressing them out.

### **Some of the more common and mild calming signals include:**

- Yawning
- Lip licking
- Avoiding eye contact
- \*Full body shake off (as if they are shaking off water)
- \*Sitting
- Drooling
- Mouthy-ness
- Jumping on you



Felix "avoiding" the camera

**Some of the more moderate signals include:**

- Wrinkled brows
- Dilated pupils
- Wide mouth panting – tends to be shallow or forceful and their mouth is opened wider than usual
- Whining – often anxiety or excitement

**Some of the more severe and more well-known signals include:**

- Whale eye (eyes bulging, with the white of the eyes exposed)
- Tail tucked
- Body trembling/shivering
- Ears plastered back
- Dog appears to stop breathing
- Crouching or low body posture
- Shrinking away from being touched
- Stiffness

It is very important to consider all these signals in context. If you have food in your hand and your dog is licking his lips, he is probably doing so because of the food and not due to stress. However, if you are allowing your child to hug your dog and he is licking his lips, stiffens up, or stops breathing – this means your dog is NOT comfortable with this full body embrace. These are the signals that come before the growl or the bite but often people are unaware of them.

As a less serious example, if every time you try to take a picture of your dog, he turns his head away from the camera, that is avoidance – not a dog that is purposely trying to keep you from getting a good picture. It means he doesn't like having his picture taken. Still using that example, that is a good time to teach your dog that if he looks at the camera... right after the snap of the picture, he will get a treat or the ball thrown. Very quickly, your dog will probably create a much more positive association with having a camera pointed at him!

The behaviors above that are marked with an asterisk are the cut-off cues. You will often see these when a dog is interacting with another dog. If he needs a break, he may shake off or sit down. Sitting down leans toward a less-than-comfortable interaction, while the shake-off tends to happen when the dogs just need a moment between play. You may also notice that when one dog shakes off, their playmate does as well!

If you notice these signals in your dog, especially repetitively, consider what is happening in the environment and help your dog out. Either remove your dog or remove the threat, and then start teaching him that what makes him uncomfortable can actually be a good thing! Of course, consult a Dog Behavior professional who uses positive training methods if you feel that you need extra help or if your dog is showing signs of the moderate to severe signals.

Dog Trainer Turid Rugaas coined the term “calming signals” and wrote an

excellent book on the topic called On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals. If interested in learning more information on this topic, I would highly recommend picking up a copy.

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