



Do you understand your dog?

Communication doesn't start when we speak, it starts when we listen (IMDT)

Its not easy to write about body language as it helps for us to see it and learn but having an understanding of what to look out for and some of the warning signs might help you to recognise what you see in your dog. And is it good, bad or neutral?

The reason it's important to talk about body language is because so many people are unaware that their dog is trying to communicate with them. Its not until the dog literally 'yells' with its body language (or bites!) that people tend to sit up and take notice; this is often when the dog is being 'naughty', bad or perhaps even aggressive. If we don't respond to our dog's communication signals they may stop trying to communicate with us or lose communication skills from their vocabulary. If communication is ignored over and over, what's the point?

This can have dire consequences. It includes those dogs that bite 'without warning' & sometimes dogs are euthanised because they started biting; but if the warning signs were picked earlier up its highly likely the dog may never have had to resort to biting. Note that some rescue dogs may have had a history of punishment for showing communication warning signs (such as growling). Its not too late to help those dogs communicate more effectively (without biting) but be sure to seek expert help.

So what are some good signs? Well all body language needs to be taken in context to the situation (environment) and in combination with other signals; don't just interpret one body part. But things I like to see from a dog include relaxed muscles (of the face and body) maybe squinty / soft eyes, mouth open (and bottom teeth visible) a relaxed, gentle tail wag (not too high, not too low) & a relaxed pace of movement. The dog is likely to be oriented toward you and if you are petting the dog and stop it's a positive sign if they move back in for more.

Signs that the dog may be uncomfortable (or early warning signs) may include nose licking, yawning or blinking. Maybe they turn their head away, or even turn their whole body away. Don't see this as your dog being rude; but maybe there is a low level of discomfort there. For an example see the video on the video gallery page of our website; Does your dog like cuddles?

Stronger signs may include the dog walking away, creeping away or leaning 'on the back foot' with weight distributed away from something or someone. Maybe they are standing or sitting with the tail tucked firmly between their legs? At a higher level of anxiety or stress you may also see tense muscles, a hard body, a furrowed brow (like a frown) a hard stare or even wide-open eyes (seeing the whites of the eyes referred to as a whale eye). These are much stronger warning signs that should be acted on; maybe the dog needs space? Maybe they need more time to absorb the situation or maybe a person or dog approaching them needs to back off. If these warning signs are ignored its likely things will escalate. The dog is saying they are not comfortable or not happy.

When a dog finally reacts (we called it reactive behaviour, some people also refer to it as aggression) it usually means there has been warning signs prior; not always, but mostly. A smaller number of dogs will actually ignore a stress totally (usually they will be sniffing the ground to calm themselves down). An example may be if a dog is not happy seeing another dog or meeting a



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person; they may in fact ignore the 'trigger' totally but if they get too close they might explode in a display of reactive behaviour or aggression. It might start with growling, but may instead be barking, lunging, snapping or biting.

Generally, by the time you see growling, barking, lunging or a bite there has been signs of escalation prior. Its our job to see those warning signs and help the dog out.

For more information on reactive behaviour see the Clever Creatures website (resource pages) or for more learning see our online training course on reactive behaviour.

IMDT is the Institute of modern Dog trainers. Sarah is a fully qualified member of the IMDT & along with a Bachelor of science (in animal behaviour) a certificate in Training and assessing, vet nursing and zoo keeping Sarah runs Clever Creatures at Oakford and Samson.