

How to Speak Dog



If only dogs could speak English, and we could speak 'dog'. We are two different species with different methods of communication. It is up to us as dog owners to learn to 'speak dog'.

We need to be aware of body language that shows both relaxation and anxiety/stress.

IMPORTANT: A wagging tail does NOT always mean a friendly dog. A wagging tail can simply mean that the dog is interested and alert - the rest of the dog's body language will tell the full story.

Signs of Relaxation

Facial Expressions:

- Making eye contact
- Soft face - no tension in facial muscles
- Soft eyes, closing - pupils not dilated
- Ears hanging, relaxed
- Lack of vocalisation

Body Postures:

- Tail hanging in a relaxed manner (not upright, stiff or between legs)
- Absence of shivering or shaking
- Lack of body tension
- Flat hackles
- Relaxed stance, e.g. body not bracing forwards, lunging or hunched over
- Stretching
- Lying down
- Slowed breathing

Signs of Stress

- Panting
- Trembling
- Dilated pupils
- Ears flat against the head
- Whining
- Pacing
- Scratching
- Self-mutilation
- Urinating/defecating
- Barking
- Lip-licking
- Express anal sac secretions



Signs of Fear, Anxiety and Conflict

When a dog feels fearful, uncomfortable, anxious or conflicted it has only four possible behaviour options. We call them the 'Four F's':

1. FLIGHT

Retreating/running away - this is to increase the distance between what is scary and itself. If they are restrained whether by a leash or in a confined space, flight is not an option for them.

2. FIGHT

Using aggression in an attempt to make the scary thing go away. This is usually a dog's last response (at least initially). The fight option is very successful at creating distance and dogs will often begin choosing this option more frequently. If they look confident it's because they know fighting works! Remember, they are still feeling very fearful.

WARNING SIGNS OF AGGRESSION (THE SIGNS GIVEN OFF BEFORE A BITE):

- Fiddling/displacement signs
- Freezing (becoming suddenly very still)
- Staring
- 'Whale eye' (showing the whites of the eyes)
- Lip lifting
- Hackles along the back raised
- Growling
- Mouth closing
- BITING



The progression from a warning sign to a bite can happen VERY quickly and can be easily missed by untrained eyes.

IMPORTANT: Please NEVER punish your dog for growling.

Growling is a warning sign telling you that they are uncomfortable about the particular situation. If the warning sign is punished, then the next time the dog is in that situation, it may skip the warning and bite first.

3. FREEZE

The dog may look calm, but he/she is still in an internal state of stress and panic. They have 'shut down'. This is where the dog hopes that if it doesn't move or react it will not provoke the scary environment and the threat will go away. Animals in 'freeze' are in a state called 'learned helplessness'. This is where they have learned that no behaviour output helps them and so they just give up (though they are extremely stressed).

4. FIDDLE

Dogs may display one or more of these signs if they are feeling uncomfortable/anxious in a situation and want to avoid conflict or 'diffuse' the situation (similar to when we 'fidget'). Displacement behaviours are often very subtle but easily recognisable once you are aware of them.

- Blinking eyes
- Avoiding eye contact
- Lip licking
- Yawning
- Turning head
- Sniffing
- Shaking body (as if it were wet)
- Stretching
- Scratching
- Moving slowly
- Lifting front paw to 'point'

Signs that are often interpreted as 'hyperactive', but are actually signs of anxiety:

- Diverting attention (distracted)
- Lacking focus on the owner
- Abstaining from eating treats
- 'Snatching' treats
- 'Muzzle punching'
- Mouthing
- Jumping up

