

Dog communication is the transfer of information between dogs, and also the transfer of information between dogs and humans. Dogs communicate mainly through body language and when they feel threatened, will often show signs of what *looks* like aggression. Many trainers classify dogs as being aggressive if they have the intent to harm another dog. It's most likely your dog is showing agonistic behavior than aggression. Most dogs don't want to harm another dog and try their best to keep another dog away without having to resort to violence. The sequence of behavior in doing so is your dog displaying agonistic behavior.

Agonistic behavior is any social behavior related to fighting. The term has broader meaning than aggressive behavior because it includes threats, displays, retreats, appeasement, and other actions to end a disagreement.

So, why is it that many dogs go from excited, submissive or gentle but firm agonistic displays of behavior to biting dogs? Our goal of this handout is for you to have a good understanding of proper etiquette between dogs, how they use their body language to communicate, how to interpret it, how you can help your dog make better choices to increase a successful greeting and finally, why your dog has been displaying, what seems to be, aggressive behaviors toward other dogs.

What Affects Dog Communication?

Safety

Safety is a key factor in how your dog responds to a situation. Dogs communicate to each other how; safe, comfortable, stressed or concerned they are through body language.

To a dog, another dog is seen as *a part of the pack or an outsider.*

Dogs that are seen as outsiders are either: competition for resources, potential threats or prey. Outsiders can be accepted into the group and likewise insiders can be cast out.

Possessions and space help make a dog feel safe and they spend a great deal of time negotiating for them. Status is also important to dogs. They are capable of becoming very aggressive to resolve conflicts while at the same time they must often live together peacefully. This involves constant communication about personal space. Each dog varies in how much space they need to feel comfortable. Some dogs guard their space while others are happy to share their space.

Breed

Dog breed characteristics can affect how they communicate through body language especially during play. As a general rule of thumb most dogs from the *sporting or hound group* will have more playful dispositions toward other dogs and people since they were bred to work closely within their pack. *Terriers* were bred to be more independent of their packs since they work individually hunting small animals and as a result their play can turn predatory faster. *Herding dogs* will be more likely to chase and bite dogs. *Guarding breeds* are more likely to show warning and guarding behaviors sooner during play and interactions.

What is a Negotiating Signal?

Dogs have 4 options when they are approached or approach another dog: **Fight, Flight, Avoid or Submit.** During this meeting they'll feel: **Safe, Comfortable, Stressed or Concerned**

Dogs try to get through the day with the least amount of conflict and will usually choose avoidance through negotiating signals. These negotiating signals help the dogs avoid trouble.

The function of a negotiating signals is to “postpone or break off agonistic conflict” according to Lindsay (2000). He says, the negotiating signal referred to by Tinbergen is a “**compromise movement**” rather than a “**submissive gesture**” used as an “**opportunity to call a draw or walk away without further conflict and potential injury to the contestants.**”

“...the negotiating signal is an expressive compromise between fighting and fleeing” saying further the “...apparent function of the negotiating signal is to suspend sensory contact momentarily with the arousing stimulus” attempting to avoid any further escalation toward a fight and avoid a “chase attack” if the animal chose to flee. According to Lindsay, negotiating signals has “relaxing effects” and appear to “...influence the opponent to reciprocate in kind” leading to mutual compromise rather than submission.

As you can see these negotiating signals are very important for dogs to communicate because it helps them avoid conflict.

What do these Negotiating Signals look like?

Negotiating Signals often look like:

Sideways approach, tongue lick, looking away, sitting, sniffing, squinting, yawning, scratching, blinking, shake off, grooming.

Friendly and well socialized dogs will often ask for permission first before saying ‘hi’. They ask for permission by offering a negotiating signal and look for one in return. When a dog sends a negotiating signal they are expecting one back as a reassurance about intention and that the other dog is a non-threat.

Lets Take a Look at How Dogs Communicate: Body Language

If you want to understand what a dog’s intentions are, first start at the nose and finish at the tail. You can learn more from the dogs face than the dogs tail.

Eyes

**Dogs can see very well and have great peripheral vision. If they’re looking straight at something there’s a good reason for it and it’s a stressor.*

Wide open / whale eye (stressed), squinty with no tension around the eyes (non-threatening negotiating signal), dilated pupils (stress, anger, fear or excitement. Dilation happens from an adrenaline dump), blinking (non-threatening negotiating signal), starring no tension around eyes (curiosity or alerting or targeting, guarding, predation or direct threat), direction of eyes (stressed at what they are looking at) or lack of eye contact (friendly non threatening behavior, negotiating signal), direct stare with tension around eyes (indicates challenge or conflict) or non-direct eye contact (friendly non threatening behavior, negotiating signal), soft (neutral, relaxed, content), a fast look (warning) or slow look (warning often leading to aggression, as if to say ‘back off’), scanning (either defensive or predation), no tension (relaxed) or tension around eyes (stressed).

Mouth

Tongue flick (flicks towards what stresses them and is a negotiating signal or early warning sign), lips pursed (stressed or sign of aggression coming), long lips (stressed), teeth bared (aggression or smiling in an appeasement or submission), open wide (stressed), relaxed slightly open (neutral, relaxed), licking (submissive gesture), C shaped (aggression), relaxed/loose (relaxed), closed (tense and stressed, often a precursor to an aggressive act), no tension

(relaxed depending on how open the mouth is. If the dog isn't breathing it could be a threat or warning toward another dog) or tension (stressed or aggression), breathing (relaxed, neutral state) or no breathing (often a precursor to aggression or conflict), yawn (stressed, confused or frustrated), panting (tired or stressed).

Ears

Relaxed (content, neutral, relaxed demeanor), perked (alert, guard, protective, conflict, early warning sign of aggression), floppy (relaxed), forward (alert, guard, protective, conflict, early warning sign of aggression).

Head

Up (protective, alert) or down (stalking, fearful or submissive depending on the context), sideways away from dog or person (non-threatening negotiating signal).

Back

Arched / round (stressed, fearful, overly submissive posture to be as non-threatening as possible and a negotiating signal), pilo-erection (muscular tension along the spine that is a reflexive action when insecure or uncertain or highly aroused {often times called Hackles}).

Legs

Braced (tense), not braced (relaxed), paw lift (non threatening gesture, anticipation, stalking, pointing, curiosity, submissive gesture "I come in peace").

Body

Lowered front end and hind up (stalking, aggression toward another dog or person if the head is lowered and the ears perked as well as eyes directed and starring. Could also be they are about to pounce to initiate play {this is often an exaggerated form of lowered front end with elbows touching ground}), forward facing (stressed about what they're facing, confident, dominant), sitting (calming signal toward another dog- no threat), stillness (a focused dog with a tense / still body is many times seen as stalking or an aggressive act but it can also proceed a play bow. Stillness predicts guarding or warning. Sudden stillness ends in an explosion of activity ie. emotional reaction), weight shifted over front legs (about to move forward) or shifted back (about to move backward), 'on toes' (unsure, stress), direct approach (confident and possibly about to create conflict *context important), shake off (dog is coming down off of adrenaline or communicate non threatening intent), submission / rolling on back (manipulation of the dog to gain something in their favor. As in something is in it for them. It's also appeasement to show no threat), butt sniff (appropriate as long as it's invited and not too long. Dog should peel off if the dog is saying enough by a calming signal), proctology butt sniff (in the groin) is rude, unnecessary and pushy. It's seen as an invasion of space.

Tail

Down (usually means cautious, nervous or sometimes concentration), relaxed (relaxed), half mass (relaxed), raised relaxed (alert, tension, confident), raised tense (alert, tension, aggression), wagging (wanting to interact), stiff (tense, alert), tucked (fearful, nervous).

*This is a generalization but context is always important during interpretation of body language.

Lets Take a Look at Some Emotional States of the Dog

Confident

Erect stance, standing tall, tail up, tail wagging in a slower sweep, ears pricked up or relaxed, direct or relaxed look, relaxed body, smaller pupils, forward shift in weight and advancing forward. (The aroused photo is similar to what a confident dog may look like minus the pilot erection and a more relaxed body).

Relaxed

Ignoring others is neutrality and socially appropriate. A dog that's relaxed and quiet is ideal or they're behaving in a way for their advantage (for instance looking directly at a dog to threaten for space or possession or rolling on their back to submit and avoid conflict or invite play). Relaxed and confident dogs are happy to share space during introductions. Looking away is common to avoid conflict. Dogs often show politeness by not looking at other dogs while humans are quite the opposite.

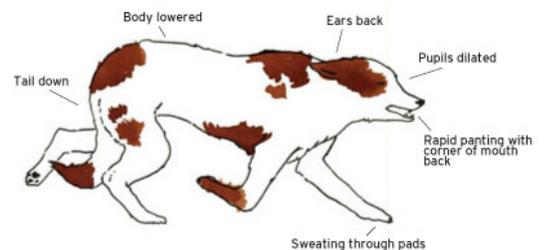
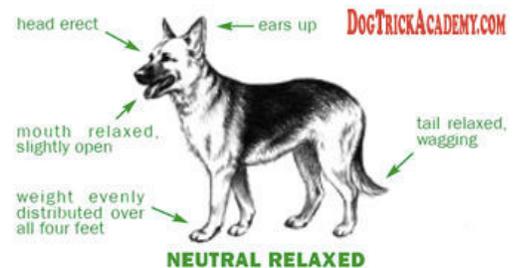
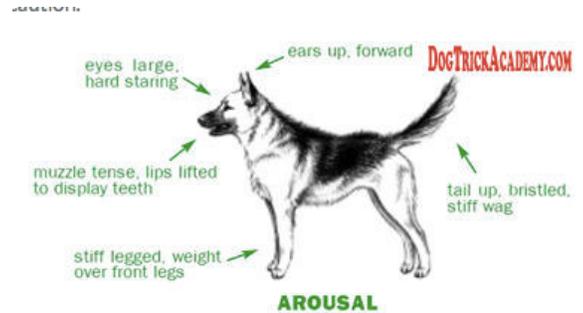
Tense / Fear / Anxiety / Stress

Facial veins are prominent underneath the eyes and above the mouth, furrowed brow above the dog's eyes shows tension and there is some wrinkling, panting with his mouth is open wider than seems necessary, penis crowning (when the tip of the dog's penis sticks out of its sheath) whale eye, lowered stance, tail down or tucked under, tail wagging in a quick frantic way looking away or turning head away, lowered stance, tail down or tucked under, tail wagging in a quick frantic buzz, looking away or turning head away. Stressed dogs often look in the opposite direction of what stresses them often accompanied by signals of stress: Lip licking, facial tension, ears held back or down.

Aggression

Ears erect, tense body, no breathing / mouth closed prior to aggression, tail up, body distribution forward, stiff legs and body, growls, lowered head, ears "pinned" back close to the head prior to aggression, erect during aggression. Eyes narrow (but not squinty) and fixed intently or rounded and with whites showing, lips sometimes drawn back in a snarl, lips pursed and closed prior to aggression, "hackles" (hair along back, especially over the shoulders and rump) up and erect; tail straight out, and intense stares (pupils may be fully dilated).

*Right before an aggressive display your dog will be giving warnings. The warning would be similar to this photo except the dog would be totally still, not breathing and looking at another dog without blinking (possibly out of the corner of the eye). Be proactive instead of reactive in dog training and interrupt the two dogs at the warning before it gets to an aggressive act.



Interactions

Friendly Greetings

Body posture is soft, sideways approach, ears drawn back or half mast, sweeping or gently, waving tails, relaxed jaws, no tension. *friendly dogs often wait for invitations before invading space.

Non-Friendly Greeting

Direct approach, 'on toes', tail raised, direct stare, body tense, closed mouth, no breathing, tension in mouth, forward movement during display of aggression. *non-friendly dogs don't understand or care that another dog is uncomfortable and sending negotiating signals and make forward advancements even when dog is uncomfortable. It's considered impolite in the dog world to make advances towards another dog that is sending uninterested negotiating signals.

Play

Why dogs play:

To socialize, prove their status, use dogs to satisfy their need to herd or treat them like predators. Well socialized dogs are able to adapt their play style to another dogs play style. Not all dogs like to play and that's okay. There are lots of different play styles ranging from chasing games, bump games, wrestling, pretend biting, tug of war, possession games and some just like to walk around with the other dogs or prefer not to play. The most important thing to focus on during playing is keeping the dogs non reactive and neutral in a group setting.

Predator vs Prey Roles:

During play your dog will either be role playing the predator or prey role. Dogs with good canine communication and play skills role play back and forth between predator and prey roles. How do our dogs stay out of trouble and conflict? During the play they take stops routinely to make sure the play doesn't escalate into predation. These breaks will send negotiating signals to each other to check in and make sure that everything is still friendly and without conflict. Breaks help adrenaline levels drop. How can you tell the dogs are comfortable in their roles? Often times during play take a look at the dog that is in the prey role as the one role playing the predator role will often look aggressive. If the prey looks concerned, fearful or uneasy then the play will morph into conflict. If the prey looks comfortable and relaxed then it's still innocent and fun. Without these negotiating signals play can turn into a fight quickly. Watch out for the arousal from the prey as well. Many dogs that enjoy prey roles become highly aroused and the play gets out of hand and too intense. The prey dog becomes frightened and they tuck their tail and act more prey like which can cause a conflict and aggressively predatory behavior back causing a fight. Overtly predatory play is dangerous as it can cause the other dog to go into a defensive state. Overtly predatory behaviors look like; going for the throat which is directed toward the jugular vein to do a hold bite to cut off blood and oxygen to the brain. Hamstrings to impale the victim and biting over the back at the spine.

During play:

Play should look like a tea party as well as a football fight. Dogs orient toward each other and are giving each other consistent calming signals while breaking off from play routinely to reassure that it's just play and a non escalation of conflict. During play direction of eye contact and shape are important. Often the dogs have physical body contact with no tension in the body, tails are often wagging, the play dance should be back and forth with a switch from both predator to prey. Paw lifts are an invitation as opposed to braced legs. Many dogs faces are also extremely goofy with no tension, blinking often, no prolonged stares and breaks from play with constant negotiating signals like open mouths, breathing, tails wagging. Some dogs use a submissive body posture to solicit play from another dog others a play bow. Play bows are used to invite play by having their rear up and elbows touching or near ground, direction of eye contact, ears up alert, lowered tail or down, mouth partially open lips relaxed, during play: rear up ears up, tail up mouth closed. more of an intent to pounce with mouth closed and tail up. Paw on top of back is a challenge to play or to be dominant, play bows with butt in the air and soft features with mouth open and tail up are often friendly. Some play bows with head down, direct stare, ears back and no breathing with tail tense can be predatory. Back and forth exchange of predator and prey roles with breaks in between play to assure each party that it's just play and not conflict.

Guarding

Guarding has to do with establishing ownership and ownership is about possession. Possession: "what I have is MINE". These things are usually objects or locations. Many times the conflict has to do with status. Lowered Head along with staring eyes and body tension are the most distinguished behaviors along with ears forward or lowered, dilated pupils (adrenaline dump) and eyes wide open. Stalking can be seen during guarding. Stalking is shown by eyes forward and tense body, weight shifted forward and head down, eyes- scanning, targeted and chosen a victim and fixated. When the mouth is open the dogs intent is less serious. A high tail is playfulness and tail down with mouth closed is more intense.

Warning

Aggression comes in many forms. It can come as a threat, a warning or an act. Lets take a look at them all. A warning can be very subtle but if you know what to look for they'll forever feel like big noticeable warnings to take seriously.

Mouth closed, No Breathing, No Blinking, On Toes, Tense around the Eyes and Face

Some warnings are at a direct stare and others are with their noses pointed away and looking at the dog or person from the side. Sometimes the mouth is just pursed. The less lips the more of the seriousness of the aggression and this holds true as well for the eyes (the more closed the eyes the more serious the intent).

How Can Training Help?

How did our dogs get this way? Why do some dogs choose to aggress while others choose to negotiate space and send negotiation signals? Dogs are naturally good communicators but when put into situations they feel violated in they learn their negotiating signals doesn't work. In return, they learn to become defensive leading them to become reactive and not responsive and blowing by other dogs negotiating signals escalating the intensity of the greeting.

Training can help teach your dog their native language again by forcing them to think instead of react as well as helping to diffuse an interaction by displaying a negotiating signal like looking away. By teaching a 'heel' or 'move away' command we force our dogs to learn that looking away and moving away is a better option than running in and fighting. Remember, friendly dogs look away. We don't want our dogs first impression to be unfriendly to another dog because it sets them up to fail.

With help from a qualified trainer, they will help you to train your dog to a high level of obedience in case you need to force your dog to make that negotiating signal. Secondly, your dog should be socializing with other dogs that help him feel confident and comfortable around other dogs. These dogs will help your dog build confidence because they will back off when your dog is sending negotiation signals. Using an overly friendly or pushy dog will only digress your dogs training and confidence.

Not understanding what your dog is saying can hurt your relationship especially if you're trying to train them and you correct your dog for an agonistic behavior. When the fearful dog bites or reacts they are usually to blame. Dogs feeling unsafe are often times deemed reactive or dangerous when all they're asking for is space.

Lastly, don't forget that first greetings are always the most uncomfortable and having a polite greeting is the key to making more friends. Even your overly friendly dog needs to have some boundaries with other dogs. Their overly friendly nature still doesn't exempt them from having manners. Just because someone is friendly doesn't mean they get to go up to anyone and hug them and invade their space as if they were someones best friend.

Rhonda Bilodeau is a certified professional dog trainer in the Burlington, Vermont area. She owns Vermont Dog Pack where she specializes in off-leash recall, puppies and dog to dog socialization. Her packages teach owners what proper etiquette between dogs look like, what specific displays of behavior mean. and how to improve their dogs greetings on and off-leash. She co-owns Vermont Dog Socials, a dog socialization program for dogs that have limited dog interaction because of their reactivity or aggression. The socials help dogs that have lost their native language and need help building confidence around dogs. They are open to any dog actively going through her training programs. You can find out more about her programs at VermontDogPack.com