Understanding your dog’s body language

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One of the reasons dogs make such good pets is the remarkable way they can communicate with humans. Pet dogs see us as an extension of their own canine family, and are very quick to interpret our moods and intentions. An understanding of how dogs communicate with other dogs will help the observant owner correctly figure out the message their pet is trying to convey.

Communication—canine style

Dogs can communicate with other dogs through a series of signals, including a variety of facial expressions, body postures, noises, and scents. Your dog will use his mouth, eyes, ears, and even his tail to express his emotions. By reading the combination of body signals, you should be able to work out who is top dog in any confrontation or situation.

A dog that's feeling brave or aggressive will try to give the impression of being a larger, more powerful animal. He will stand tall with his ears and tail erect, thrust his chest forward, and may raise the hairs around his neck and along his back (his hackles). He may

also wave his tail slowly and growl.

A submissive dog, on the other hand, will try to appear small and puppy-like. Adult dogs will chastise puppies, but they don't attack them. A submissive dog's approach to a more dominant individual is likely to be from the side, crouching near to the ground with its tail held low and wagging enthusiastically. He may also try to lick the hands or paws and face of the dominant dog (or person). If this isn't appeasing enough, he might then roll onto his back to expose his stomach. In this position, some dogs will involuntarily pass a small amount of urine.

Tales the tail tells

One pattern of behaviour that's characteristic of dogs, and familiar to almost everyone, is tail wagging. Most people would recognise that loose, free tail wagging indicates pleasure and a general friendliness. Exaggerated tail wagging, which extends to the entire rump, is seen in subordinate dogs, as well as dogs with very short tails.

The tail, however, is also an indicator of other emotions. A tail waved slowly and stiffly, in line with the back, expresses anger. Clamped low over the dog's hindquarters is a sign that the dog is afraid. Anxious or nervous dogs may stiffly wag their drooping tails as a sign of appeasement.

Ears, eyes, and lips

The facial expressions of your dog will tell you a lot about his mood, whether he's anxious or excited, frightened or playful, or any one of a vast range of emotions he may express. His ears prick up when he's alert or listening intently, but are held back or flattened onto the head when expressing pleasure, submission, or fear. To read his mood correctly, you must watch for other body signals at the same time.

The narrowing or half-closure of the dog's eyes indicates either pleasure or submission, but when his eyes are wide open, he intends to be aggressive. In the wild, the pack leader can maintain control simply by staring at a subordinate dog. The two animals will continue to stare at each other until one challenges the other, or until one lowers his head and turns away.

You should not try to outstare your dog if he has aggressive or nervous tendencies—this could provoke an attack. Nevertheless, regular, gentle eye contact reassures the dog and reinforces your relationship.

Submissive dogs and those of certain breeds, notably Labradors, may appear to be smiling when they open their mouth to show the teeth in a lop-sided grin of friendliness. In the snarl of aggression, however, both lips are drawn right back to expose most of the teeth, and may be accompanied by a growl.

Playtime

A dog will indicate his desire to play by raising a front paw or by performing the play bow, which is often accompanied by barking to attract attention. Other gestures include offering a play object or bounding up to another dog to invite chase.

Now that you know more about your dog's rich and varied body language, you may understand him better than ever. And that can lead to an even closer relationship.

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