

UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOG

A QUICK GUIDE TO BODY LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

While dogs communicate through a wide range of sounds, they also signal their emotions and feelings through body language and gestures. This creates a type of 'body semaphore' which allows them to speak without talking and forms a complex language in its own right.

You may be well aware that snarling lips, growls, snaps and bites indicate a dog is unhappy about a situation. These are usually given as a warning that they want something to stop, or to give them more space. It's quite hard to miss these signals, but there are a number of much more subtle clues that your dog may use beforehand. These subtle signs are typically an indicator of concern, a polite request for you to behave differently. The more obvious growls and snaps only occur if these subtle signs are ignored.

You may recognise some of these in your dog's behaviour, or observe them by watching dogs interacting with other dogs at a park;

- Eyes becoming wider or taking on a 'fixed stare'
- A stillness of their overall posture
- Licking their lips or nose
- Yawning
- Turning their head away



These are involuntary reactions to their feeling of anxiety in a situation; just as you may startle if someone touches you unexpectedly from behind. If you stop what you are doing or move away, they will feel more comfortable and stop giving you that signal. If it doesn't work, the dog may feel the need to make their intentions more explicit, by growling or barking at you. Never ignore this! If the dog learns that growling doesn't get you to stop, they may stop bothering with the warning and go straight to the next stage...a bite.

READING YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Dogs are skilled at reading the body language of other dogs, and are pretty expert at reading the body language of the people around them too. If we take time to learn what they find threatening, we can respond to them in ways that help calm a situation rather than make it worse. In doggy terms, it's not very polite to meet head on or to stare. Being restricted or stood over is also threatening. Furthermore, just like us, they will have their own sense of personal space, which varies depending on how comfortable they feel about the other dog or person.

MAKE THEM FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE

If you want to make a dog feel more relaxed around you, try ignoring them and allow them to take their own time to approach you if they want to. If they prefer to stay away, respect that



decision. Avoid direct eye contact, and definitely don't stare! They will be more comfortable if they are presented with your side or back view, keeping your arms relaxed at your sides or held loosely in front. Approach at an angle, towards their side, instead of heading straight towards them. If you're sitting down you can angle yourself away from them and relax backwards into the chair.

OFFERING CONTACT

We can tend to assume that if a dog is close to us, they would like to be touched, but this is not always the case. As dogs are typically lower down than us, you may lean forwards over them and reach out to touch their head (the nearest bit!) without thinking about it. But if we consider what dogs find threatening, this combination of movements can make them nervous; you are bigger than them, leaning into their space and reaching over the top of them with your hand. To make things work you might also be facing head on and looking into their eyes at the same time. All this adds up to a recipe for concern; you might get a lip lick, they could turn their head away or they might even growl.

With a dog who is unsure, keep it minimal. Hugging may be popular with people, and we love to hug others for reassurance, but it can make a nervous dog feel more threatened as it restricts their movement and can make them feel trapped. Likewise holding your hand out; they can smell you from a good distance away so there is no need to invade their personal space with your arm.



In particular, be careful about touching a nervous dog in a small or enclosed space, such as a narrow corridor or doorway. Remember they may feel unsure about being touched when lying down, whether or not they are on their bed at the time. Ideally allow the dog to touch you first, and notice if they then move away or stay. Many will choose to position themselves to avoid direct eye contact; sitting alongside you often works well. If they decide to stay you might then try a gentle stroke of a shoulder, a scratch behind the ears or under their chin, depending on which part of them is closest. Less is more!