

Dogs are nonverbal communicators. How often have we wished to know what was in their thoughts, what they were trying to tell us? Turid Rugaas has found a way. Turid has a special insight to canine body language. To date she has identified numerous distinct body postures which, alone or in combination, can provide us with vast quantities of useful information about our pet. The following are "calming signals." They are behaviors dogs use to calm themselves or others around them.

MOVING SLOWLY

A dog intending to use signals, upon seeing another dog in the distance, will start to move slowly. This exaggerated slow motion is a calming signal, and one which can be used early and effectively when meeting. Joggers, cars and bicycles may approach quickly and may appear as a threat. Example: Carl and his dog Sheena were walking down a narrow city sidewalk. A young boy ran along the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Sheena was worried about this quick motion and immediately attempted, as best she could while on a tight leash, to display calming signals with her body language. Sheena was ignored by the child who was intent on other things. Sheena's signals were of no use, so she resorted to threats such as barking a "get away from me" warning.

MOVING IN AN ARC

Rarely upon first meetings will dogs approach each other nose to nose. Only dogs which are very sure of the outcome of a situation will attempt to meet head on. More frequently dogs approach each other in curving lines, walk beyond each other's nose to sniff rear ends while standing side to side. Perhaps Carl could have been more attentive, recognized a troublesome situation for his dog and helped Sheena by leading her in an arc past the oncoming child. This curving theory has been proven time and time again. Ask any groomer or veterinarian. Most apprehensive dogs are more easily approached if not confronted head on. When approached from the side, one can gain the dog's confidence more readily. Unfortunately dogs are constantly put into situations where they must accept confrontation. It's wise to condition dogs to accept this eventuality gracefully.

SNIFFING THE GROUND

Dogs use their noses to explore their environment, but at times sniffing seems to have a different significance. Owners have attributed out of context sniffing to lack of concentration or stalling. Some say it's a displacement activity. Turid categorizes sniffing during times of stress as a calming signal. Example: You and your dog Spot are patiently waiting in the veterinarian's reception room. Spot is thinking, "Wow! that human in the long white coat keeps walking in and out. She looks and smells strangely. This is scary! I'd better sniff the floor of the waiting room now to show that I mean no harm and maybe she'll leave me alone." Granted, the floor of the waiting room probably has many intriguing smells, but it could be Spot's way to calm himself and others around him. Example: Ken allowed his dog Ginger off leash. "Ginger, COME" thunders Ken. Ginger approached Ken slowly, in a curve, then paused to sniff. Is she being spiteful or could it be conflict resolution? Has her past experience taught her that "Come" is often followed by an unpleasant state of affairs - time to go home, time to come away from something more interesting, time to receive a punishment? What tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions does Ken use when calling Ginger? Is Ginger untrained, bad, distracted or is she trying to explain something to Ken?

SITTING, LYING

These positions are probably the most graphic calming signals of all. You can see them being used in active play sessions. A dog will spontaneously drop when things get out of control. How many dogs, when receiving a reprimand from the owner will sit or lie down? Turid sees this as a signal that the dog is anxious and is trying to calm the owner down.

LIP LICKING

This quick little flick of the tongue is language which often goes unnoticed because it is shadowed by more overt signals. It is yet another way for a dog to convey the same message, for everybody to calm down. Go back through some photos of your dogs. Frequently lip licking can be seen in photographs. Posing for a photo can be a problem for some dogs. Many are worried about the camera which has a staring eye following their every move!

BLINKING, AVERTING EYES, TURNING AWAY

When a dog approaches another, it's a very interesting moment in time for those individuals. Why then, do we see dogs looking away, exaggerating an eye blink or turning their heads away from approaching dogs? Is it disinterest, distraction or a calming signal? People who work with dogs realize early in their careers that they can gain the confidence of a worried dog more quickly by avoiding direct eye contact, or even better, by turning away with their backs or sides to the dog.

YAWNING

Perhaps the most intriguing of all signals is yawning. Jane and her dog Fido are at the neighborhood barbecue. The volleyball players are smacking the ball with gusto, the music is playing with a resounding beat and people are animated and noisy. With all of this fun going on Fido still gives an occasional yawn. Can he be sleepy? Perhaps. Or is Fido yawning to reduce his stress and to calm down the others present. If Jane were to turn her own head away from the noisy people and yawn, would this reassure Fido?

SHAKING OFF

Not to be confused with shaking off water after a rainstorm or bath, this calming signal is used quite often with dogs. Here's an excellent example: an adult dog that is not normally aggressive is playing with a young puppy that becomes a bit too rambunctious. As a result, the adult dog ends up getting accidentally bitten in the ear by the puppy. The adult dog, in turn, puts a big paw on the puppy, 'pins' him to the ground, 'makes eye contact' with him and 'stares him down.' The puppy sees these signals and stops the behavior. The adult dog then releases the puppy, backs up just a bit and 'shakes off.' By exhibiting this physical behavior, the adult dog is 'diffusing' or 'shaking off' the nervous energy around him as if to say 'I'm sorry I did that to you, but don't bite me again!' Hopefully, the puppy will get the message and will be more respectful of the adult in the future.