

Understanding dog's body language

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From the time immemorial, dogs are considered as the best companion animal of man. Dogs have played a role in religion, myths, tales and legends of many cultures and religions. According to 2024 consumer insights study, 33 percent of Indian household own a dog, which makes the domestic dogs the most popular pet, followed by cat and fish. Dog's roles in society are also expanding day by day. This pet animal serves the mankind by assuming significant roles starting from security to amusements and also medical and veterinary research works. In the present society, parallel to the economic growth of urban people, the eagerness of possessing a beautiful dog of good pedigree has become a status symbol in the society.

These priceless pets do communicate with us using a complex language of body signals which reflects their thinking and feeling. Through their behaviors and body signals, dogs can indicate how they are feeling and what will be their action at that moment. Unlike their pet parents (human), dogs communicate mostly through body postures and scent (olfactory cues) rather than vocalization. The pet owner should learn to read their body language to understand what they are trying to communicate to us and also to other dogs nearby them. With this information, we can make sure that they have more things that bring them happiness or need to remove them from a situation they find threatening.

Unhappy dogs will have a poor quality of life. Being able to recognize and attend to the dogs' needs is not only part of being a responsible pet parent but it also helps to build a positive relationship with them. It is also crucial for safety, because a dog can pounce or bite when people fail to recognize the signals that a dog is feeling distressed.

Dogs provide judgment-free association and bring laughter and joy into our lives. Being able to interpret when your dog is happy can help you work out what activities or situations they enjoy most, so that you can provide more of those and make sure they are living their happy and comfortable life with you.

Importance of recognizing a dog's body language includes,

1. Building a strong bond with your dog by understanding their body languages.
2. One can avoid any challenging situation for the dog by recognizing when they are stressed or worried. Thus, keeping them safe.
3. By understanding their body language any negative interaction between dogs and human like dog bite can be avoided.
4. One can provide the dog with better care and attention by understanding the body language of the pet.

Dogs communicate their feelings, wants and needs through their body language, which includes

1. Different tail carriage and motion
2. Position of ear and eye
3. Increasing or decreasing pupil size
4. Movement of the body
5. Muscular tension,
6. Expressions of face.

Dogs communicate with three broad types of communications:

1. Physical communication:
2. Actions
3. Vocal communications.

Physical communications:

Types of physical communications can be different depending on the dog's mental and physical conditions. For different situation their physical communication is different.

A. Happy and relaxed dog's body language:

1. Downward Dog

When pups lean into the yoga position named after them (butt in the air, chest and front legs stretched out in front), it typically means they're ready for playtime.

2. Relaxed Open Mouth

A relaxed, happy dog's mouth hangs open. They will show a tightly closed, clenched jaw only when they are wary or distrusts something nearby.

3. Tall, Erect Stance (Relaxed)

If a dog is happy to see you, it will stand tall but appears relaxed, or has its mouth hanging open and tail wagging,

4. Mouth Open with Uprturned Corners

When a dog almost looks like it is smiling in this relaxed pose. It definitely means that the dog is chill and in a positive headspace.

B. Sad and scared dog's body language:

Scared body language usually makes the dog look like they want to avoid the situation.

1. Raised Fur

When the fur on their back and hind quarters stands on end or bristles, they're on high alert and easily excitable. It usually means "beware".

2. Pacing

A dog that walks back and forth repeatedly in the same place is full of anxiety. If this happens right before you leave the house, your dog may suffer from separation anxiety.

3. Wet Footprints

The sight of damp paw prints in your house (when it hasn't been raining) indicates that your dog is really stressed out. Canines sweat through their paw pads. In this situation, try to know the cause of its anxiety.

4. Shutting Down

Refusing to eat, pulling away when you reach out to it and growing lethargic are the symptoms that your dog is anxious, fearful or ill. This requires a lot of observation to figure out the cause.

C. Curious dog's body language:

All breeds of dog are curious in nature especially younger dogs are commonly more curious than adults. Some symptoms of a curious dog are:

1. Nose in the air (Sniffing)

This is also called air scenting. A dog is using their nose to try and figure something out without getting too close.

2. Ears Forward

Ears that are kept up or facing forward are primed for action. This means your dog is at attention; it could easily get aggressive or playful, depending on the scenario. If the dog is scared in this moment, there is a chance of accelerate into a fear-based response.

3. Sniffing

A dog's sense of smell is 10,000 times more powerful than human, so they use it to gather information. It may greet a person with a sniff as a friendly way of saying, "What's up?" It's the same reason dogs greet each other by sniffing butts.

D. Defensive or aggressive dog's body language:

Defensive aggression is usually loud, with whistle barks and hackles up. The dog gets alert, barking and trying to scare the "threat" away. Although aggressive barking or behavior can be found in any dog, but some dogs are more protective or vocal than others.

1. Tall, Erect Stance

A dog who stands with tall and erect stance with a tightly clenched jaw, grinding teeth and alert ears or bristled fur could be readying herself for a fight.

2. Curved, Tall Tail

Your dog is feeling threatened and may snap or bite next.

3. Baring Teeth

This is usually the next step on the aggression after curling lips and wrinkling noses. It means the dog's behavior is intensifying.

4. Leash Aggression

Behaviors that are caused by a dog feeling restrained, frustrated and uncomfortable in a social situation while attached to a leash are termed as leash aggression. Lunging, barking and growling at other dogs while on a leash could be a sign of leash aggression. This is because the dog feels restricted by it or anxious wearing it.

5. Ears Low and Back

Along with a wagging tail, making ears low and back typically means your dog is happy and calm. If you hear growls or aggressive behavior, it means your pup is ready to pounce.

6. Wide Eyes, Direct Stare

Large, open, alert eyes staring at an opponent mean your dog is readying itself for combat. A lot of white around the dog's pupils is a sign of big aggression.

7. Stiffening

Full-body stiffening is one of the first indicators your dog is about to get aggressive is. It's often accompanied by alert ears, tall stance, wide eyes and a closed mouth.

8. Curled Lips and Wrinkled Nose

A canine curling her lips and wrinkling her nose usually precedes some fighting words like deep growling.

Communications through action

It is said that, sometimes actions speak louder than words. Therefore, by analyzing the products of chewing or other destructive behavior, for example, is the key to understanding what the dog telling you.

1. Licking Humans

Dogs licking humans is a sign of affection. Just like cat's gasp, dogs lick to groom themselves and each other. So, by licking, either they consider you one of their packs or they can smell the crumbs of any delicious food on you.

2. Rolling Over, Exposing the Belly

This means the dog is in a very submissive mood. It could mean it's afraid, or it could mean it trusts you and is looking for a generous tummy rub.

3. Relaxed, Wagging Tail

If the dog does this, it means that it is feeling happy or excited

4. Circling Before Lying Down

Dogs will circle a cozy place or spot before actually lying down. This is just like their ancestors' wolves that had to do it to prep their bed of leaves for a good night's rest. So the dogs do the same thing before turning in for the night.

5. Nose and Lip Licking

During mealtime (or just after), licking the nose and lips is a grooming behavior. Otherwise, it is a signal of anxiety, fear or caution.

6. Panting

Dogs pant to cool themselves down on hot days. They also use it as a stress reliever. If a dog is constantly panting then the dog is full of worry.

7. Yawning

Yawning is a sign that the dog is a bored or tired. Or is eager for a threat to go away, or it wants to nap.

8. Cowered or Lowered Body

If the dog is trying to make itself smaller or lower, that means it is anxious, afraid or stressed out.

9. Licking Paws Excessively

Focused licking on paws or paw pads could signal of extreme boredom.

10. Destructive Behavior

Dogs that destroy household stuff while the owner is out of the house are likely suffering from separation anxiety. They're destroying to get attention of the owner because they're afraid and feels lonely in absence of the owner.

11. Spinning

Normally dogs spin slowly before finding the right spot to lie down. But rapid pacing combined with high pitched cry (whining) or short breath (panting) is a sure sign your dog is worried or anxious.

12. Nose in the Air Sniffing

Air sniffing or air scenting, is a signal that the dog is using its nose to try and figure something out without getting too close.

13. Sniffing

Sniffing is done to gather information. It may be done to greet a person with a sniff and friendly way of saying, "hello".

14. Curved, Tall Tail

It means your dog is feeling threatened and may snap or bite next.

15. Baring Teeth

It means the dog is becoming more and more aggressive gradually.

16. Ears Low and Back

This may be a sign of happiness if paired with a wagging tail; If there is growls or aggressive behavior, it means the dog is ready to pounce.

17. Wide Eyes, Direct Stare

Large, open, alert eyes staring at an opponent means that the dog is readying to combat with the situation.

18. Stiffening

Alert ears, tall stance, wide eyes and a closed mouth along with full-body stiffening indicates that the dog is about to get aggressive.

19. Curled Lips and Wrinkled Nose

A dog curling its lips and wrinkling its nose usually seen before some fighting words (growling).

Vocal communication

Just like physical communication, a dog's vocalizations also provide clue about how they feel. At the same time, is also important to consider the action of the whole body of the dog. It should be noticed, what does the other body parts of the dog doing at that time. These extra clues will surely help to understand what does the dog wants to communicate. For instance, growling when playing is different from growling when meeting a new dog.

1. High Growl

The more high-pitched the growl, the less threatening. Now, this doesn't mean a Chihuahua's growl is less aggressive than a German shepherd's. It's important to learn what low growls and high growls sound like from a particular dog. High-pitched growls tend to be more playful and often come out during games.

2. High-Pitched Bark

It means either one of the following-I'm happy to see you! I'm excited to play! Let's go outside so I can pee!

3. Purr

It is an excited or happy noise made by the dog to let you know that they are satisfied and happy.

4. Sighs and Groans

Dogs sigh and groan to show contentment and disappointment. Puppies moan and groan when they are settling down for a nap and adults may sigh as they relax in your lap or on their dog beds just after you've told to lie down.

5. Whining with Specific Behaviors

If your dog constantly whines when you leave the house, she could be trying to tell you it's afraid to be alone. If it stops eating food and whines at dinner time, it may have internal health issues.

6. Whine

More often whining indicates a specific want. Is the dog pacing and whining around its food bowl, it indicates that it is hungry. If it is whining at the back door, means it is ready to go out.

7. Howl

According to the American Kennel Club, dogs that howl are usually trying to communicate with other dogs. Sometimes it's to get their owner's attention. Other times it's a response to sounds like sirens or other dogs

8. Low Growl

The pitch, duration and repetition of a dog's bark help us interpret what a dog is trying to say. Low growls are associated with aggression and avoid threats.

9. Long, Sustained Growl

If a dog is deliberately growling at something. The longer the growl, the more serious it is about its decision.

10. Lots of Vocalizations in a Row

When it comes to repetition, the more your pup repeats a sound, the more urgent the need. Or it's afraid of the new friend you brought home. Either way, it's entering crisis mode.

11. Low-Pitched Bark

It means the dog is afraid of you and may fight back

Studying a dog's body language can give insights into their emotions, intentions and needs.

Dogs communicate a lot through their body posture, tail position, facial expression, and vocalizations. Understanding these signals can help the pet parents to respond to the dog's needs in a better way and create a more comfortable trusting and congenial environment. It is important to know that every dog is unique, so taking their personality into account, their body language should be closely observed in order to maintain a good relationship with them and to avoid any untoward situation.