

## The Calming Signals Most Humans Miss From Their Pets

Ignoring these signs can make your pet nervous, stressed or aggressive, and lead them to stop sending them. They are so important to understand, this expert believes these signals are the secret to a good life together. There are about 30 of them your pet may use - how many can you identify?

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs use calming signals to let others know that they're friendly and to help diffuse stressful situations
- Calming signals in dogs include yawning, licking, turning away, walking in a curve, sniffing the ground and more
- Calming signals in dogs can be subtle, so many owners may miss them altogether; watch your dog closely in stressful situations to see what types of calming signals he uses

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Your dog has many ways of communicating with you, and you're probably familiar with a number of them. A friendly tail wag to say hello, for instance, or a persistent pawing on your leg when it's time for a treat.

Dogs may also use calming signals, which describe a method of communication used to promote peace and stave off aggression within the pack. Dogs, remember, are pack animals, like wolves, and they display calming signals to let others know that they're friendly and to help diffuse stressful situations.

Calming signals in dogs can be quite subtle, however, so many owners may miss them altogether. Others may mistakenly punish their dogs for giving a calming signal in a case of miscommunication. Understanding this important method of canine communication is crucial to having a close connection with your dog.

### Why it's Important to Notice Your Dog's Calming Signals

The term "calming signals" was coined by Norwegian canine ethologist Turid Rugaas.<sup>1</sup> As she explained, dogs are incredibly perceptive and can be trained to respond to a whispered command. However, many owners believe a loud, firm voice must be used to show their dog who's boss.

To your dog, this angry-sounding voice may elicit calming signals, which your dog may use to show you there's no need to yell. In turn, an owner expecting a dog to obey a command may get increasingly angry when the dog appears to blatantly disobey — by turning away or yawning — for example.

The end result is a dog that may get punished for trying to communicate a useful message. Ultimately, if you fail to notice or respond to your dog's calming signals, he may stop giving them altogether.

Alternatively, some dogs whose calming signals are ignored become nervous, stressed or aggressive, and young dogs may go into a state of shock.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that while all dogs understand the language of calming signals, and will generally respond by calming down, most humans miss these subtle cues from their dogs.

“We need to learn to understand the language of dogs so that we can understand what our dogs are telling us. That is the secret of having a good life together,” Rugaas stated.<sup>3</sup> Indeed!

## Common Calming Signals in Dogs

**When a dog is in a stressful situation** — at the vet’s office, when a stranger walks directly toward him, when there’s yelling, or even when there’s positive stress, such as anticipation of a walk — he may use calming signals.

There are about 30 different calming signals your dog may use. Here are some common examples to keep an eye out for:<sup>4</sup>

- Yawning
- Licking (this may be a very quick lick of the nose or simply the tip of the tongue barely stuck quickly out of the mouth)
- Turning away or turning his head away (your dog may tilt his head only slightly to the side or turn completely around)
- Play bow (putting the rear end in the air and the front legs in a bowing position)
- Sniffing the ground (this may be done for calming or simply to take in the surroundings; it depends on the situation)
- Walking slowly
- Sitting down (especially with his back to you or the other dog)
- Lifting a paw
- Walking in a curve (dogs prefer to approach others in an arc, not straight on)
- Smiling or smacking lips
- Scratching as if he’s itchy
- Wagging his tail (in cases where you know the wagging is not a sign of happiness)
- Urinating on himself
- Trying to lick your face or mouth
- Making a soft face (with ears close to his head)
- Laying down with his belly against the ground (this shouldn’t be confused with laying down with his belly up, which is a sign of submission)
- Blinking
- Shake offs (this may be a slight shake or an entire body shake, as though he is shaking off water)

## You Can Try Giving Calming Signals to Your Dog, Too

If your dog gives you a calming signal, try to respond in a calm manner — lower your voice and slow your movements, for example. In times when your dog is stressed, you can also try to calm your dog by sharing a calming signal such as blinking slowly, yawning, turning or looking away, or licking your lips. Taking relaxing, deep, full breaths can also be beneficial for both of you.

Keep in mind that you should not assume that calming signals will subdue an aggressive dog or ensure that an unfamiliar dog will be friendly. However, they are useful to communicate with your own dog to strengthen your bond and deepen your level of understanding.

## What Else Is Your Dog Trying to Tell You?

You owe it to your dog to try and understand what he's trying to tell you, as he does the same for you. The average dog understands about 165 different words (although he may learn many more if you spend the time to "expand his vocabulary").<sup>5</sup>

It's known that dogs pay attention to the tone of our voices, the pitch and the rhythms in our speech, and are even able to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless sounds.<sup>6</sup>

Dogs will pay attention to your non-verbal communication too, such as following your gaze, noticing your posture and rigidity and paying attention to gestures and eye contact. If you want to better communicate with your dog, noticing his many methods of "conversation" will be important.

Aside from calming signals, here are some other primary methods dogs use to communicate with their owners:

- Dogs display submission by tucking their tails and lying on their backs. They display dominance by staring, raising their fur, and baring their teeth.
- Dogs tend to wag their tails to the right side when they encounter something pleasant (like their owners). When they see something threatening, for example a strange dog exhibiting dominant behaviors, they wag more to the left side.<sup>7</sup>
- Your dog may stare at you because he wants something to come of it, like a treat, a game of fetch, a long walk or some snuggles on your lap.
- Your dog might also stare at you to try and figure out your thoughts, as research shows a dog's gaze may follow you in an attempt to read your intention to communicate.<sup>8</sup>
- Your dog may lick you as a means of getting attention, to say "hello," and even as a form of play (especially when the tongue is used in place of teeth during play fighting).

In a world where we have come to expect those around us to understand what we are trying to communicate, I believe it's only fair to make a lifetime commitment to try and understand the language of those we have committed to care for.

Animals usually communicate clearly and effectively. It's our job to be astute enough students to watch, learn and appreciate what they are trying to tell us and, in turn, be able to respond in a way that nurtures the relationship and bond.

## Sources and References

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