

The Many Ways Your Dog Talks to You That Leave You Clueless

Why does your dog move away when you pet his head or blink after you give him a command? Those are just two of nearly three dozen communication signals that your dog may be sending you each day. How many of them do you understand?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Even though your dog is your BFF, she's a different species, which is why there are the inevitable dog-to-human communication breakdowns
- Whereas we communicate with words, dogs communicate in a variety of other ways
- Since we control every aspect of our dogs' lives, it's imperative that we learn their communication signals
- Refer to this handy dog-to-human language translator to better understand your dog's behavior and the signals he's sending
- Some of these behaviors are prewired in many dogs, but several are learned or encouraged through training (intentionally or inadvertently)

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Our dogs' behavior doesn't always make sense to us, but then, ours doesn't always make sense to them! And unlike humans, dogs are dependent on their humans for everything.

"That's a hard position to be in," writes Dr. Nicholas Dodman, world-renowned animal behaviorist, best-selling author of several books about dogs and director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, "because your dog's world is controlled by you."¹

In addition, there's the canine-to-human language barrier. Whereas we communicate with words, dogs communicate in a variety of other ways. That's why it's incredibly beneficial for dog parents to learn to understand what their pooch is "saying" to them.

"The better you understand how he experiences his world, the less likely you'll be to become frustrated or angry (and perhaps treat your charge unfairly)," says Dodman. "And, ultimately, the better and stronger the bond between the two of you will be."

And this is true for all pet parents — those who are adjusting to life with a new dog and those who've always had a dog. As science is undeniably proving, our canine companions are extremely attentive to our **moods**, body language, tone of voice and words. Hence, the least we can do in return is take the same interest in their communication with us.

Interpreting Your Dog’s Communication Signals

The following dog-to-human language translator is excerpted from Dr. Dodman’s book, “Puppy’s First Steps: The Whole-Dog Approach to Raising a Happy, Healthy, Well-Behaved Puppy:”

What dogs do	What it means when they do it
Moves away when you pet his head	He may not like the way it feels. This is also a signal of dominance to a dog. Most dogs prefer to be pet on their chin, front of chest or side of the face.
Walks in a circle before lying down	Her ancestors did this to flatten down grass and make a cozy nest. Your dog is acting on her evolutionary instincts.
Barks at mail carriers, even those he knows	The mail carrier reliably leaves every time your dog barks, so he continues to bark to exert his authority over the situation.
Grunts	Dogs grunt when they're feeling content and happy.
Whines	Dogs, especially puppies, whine when they're feeling cold, hungry or lonely. Soothe her by covering her with a warm blanket, feeding her or giving her attention in regular intervals.
Blinks	Your dog may be contemplating whether to follow a command you've just given him.
Yawns	Dogs yawn when they're tired, but more often it's because they're feeling stressed and yawning displaces the stress or inner conflict.
Licks his lips	Lip licking is a sign of nervousness, anxiety or submission.
Licks you	Your dog is seeking your attention and/or a positive reaction. In some cases, dogs lick to establish dominance.
Insists on climbing up onto the couch	Even if you've told her not to, your puppy may try to reach a higher location in a show of dominance. Or, it could be she just prefers cushions to the floor!
Paws the ground after peeing or pooping	He's marking his territory by leaving behind a visual sign (disturbed soil) and scent (likely from sweat glands on his paws).
Eats poop	This is known as coprophagia, a species-typical behavior common in puppies. In older dogs, it may have a medical or behavioral cause and can be a sign of stress.
Rolls around in disgusting stuff	Rolling in stinky stuff on the ground allows your dog to advertise where he's been. It could also be an ingrained behavior from his wild ancestors, who may have rolled in messes to mask their scent to avoid predators.
Eats grass	She might be trying to make herself vomit to relieve tummy discomfort. Or her body might be telling her she needs some additional greens for nutritional balance.
Sniffs (and sniffs and sniffs) before peeing	Your dog is taking in the other scents in the area before deciding where to leave his own. He may also be looking for a spot that hasn't been urinated on by another dog.

Sniffs other dogs' behinds	Pheromones secreted from glands around a dog's anus let other dogs know his identity.
Pants	Your dog pants to help regulate her body temperature; she may also pant when she's feeling anxious.
Acts happier around dogs of the same breed	If your dog has had pleasurable experiences with siblings and other dogs of his breed, he may expect that to continue in new dogs who look like them (and him).
Play bows	If your dog sticks her behind in the air while "bowing down" with her head and paws close to the ground, she's feeling happy and playful.
Chases his tail	Dogs with a high predatory drive and no outlet tend to tail-chase. In some dogs, the behavior can become compulsive, leading to anxiety and medical issues.
Nurses on soft items	Puppies weaned from their mothers too early may continue to suckle on soft items like blankets or stuffed toys.
Sticks her head out the car window	She does this because it's fun and the air whizzing by is full of interesting smells. It's a bad idea, however, because she can be hurt by flying objects or worse.
Barks at other dogs with his head held high	This is a sign of dominance, especially when paired with direct eye contact, tense body posture and an erect tail.
Barks at other dogs with his ears pressed to his head	This is a sign of fear or submission, especially when paired with a tucked tail and eyes that dart from side to side.
Digs fast and furiously in dirt, her bed or your bed linens	This can be a redirected predatory instinct (think terriers digging for burrowing prey).
Takes food out of his bowl and eats it elsewhere	A dog lower in the pack order might do this to protect his food from a more dominant dog (real or imagined).
Hides treats instead of eating them immediately	She's following her natural instinct to stash food for later to ensure there's some available if needed.
"Runs" in his sleep	He's dreaming, perhaps about running to catch a squirrel or other creature.
Wags her tail fast or slow	The speed of your dog's tail wagging is like an energy indicator. If she's very excited, her tail will wag fast. It will wag at a slower pace when she's interested but not 100% committed.
Tucks his tail between his legs	This is a sign of submission, uncertainty, anxiety and/or fear.
Holds her tail upright	This is a sign of interest, dominance and confidence.
Chews socks or slippers	She may lack appropriate chew toys (made of materials she prefers). P.S. If you chase her around the house to get your belongings back, she'll probably think it's a really great game.
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Sniffs people in the groin area	The nose knows. A dog can tell a lot about a person from one hit of pheromones coming from that part of the body.
Shakes toys furiously in his mouth	Your dog is doing what he would have done in the wild, which is shake his prey at the neck to kill it.
Has her back hairs up (piloerection)	This occurs when your dog's fight-or-flight stress response is triggered and releases epinephrine, causing muscles to contract that raise the hairs.

Some of these behaviors are prewired in many dogs, but several are learned or encouraged through training (intentionally or inadvertently). The best way to ensure your dog develops or maintains positive social and behavior skills is to address training issues as they arise.

Sources and References

[Bark Post \(Archived\)](#).
¹ [The Bark, November 2008/February 2015 \(Archived\)](#).
