

6 Steps to Better Canine Communication

Excerpted from *Decoding Your Dog* from the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Edited by Debra F. Horwitz, DVM, DACVB and John Ciribassi DVM, DACVB, with Steve Dale.

These six steps and the following guide will help you to "speak dog" and understand your dog's body language.

1. Learn their language.
2. Listen with our eyes.
3. Use cues that work for dogs.
4. Avoid miscommunication traps.
5. Teach a common language.
6. Have realistic expectations.

The goal is not to learn our dogs' language so that we can "speak dog" back to them; that just won't work. But we can use a knowledge of canine language to better understand our dogs' emotional states and predict what they might do next.

☑ Remember to look at the entire dog, not just one body part or a single vocalization, and to also look at the situation to get an accurate read of the dog's emotional state.

☑ Dogs understand some words, but they can't understand a full conversation. Gestures and body language are clearer ways to communicate with dogs. Clear communication takes attention and effort, but is well worth it!

☑ Not every dog can succeed in every situation. Watch your dog for signs of anxiety or aggression and change the circumstances so that the dog doesn't get overwhelmed.

☑ If something seems like it's about to happen, step in. Either remove the dog from the situation or change what's happening.

Canine Body Language

Eyes

Unwavering, fixed stare: challenge, threat, confident

Casual gaze: calm

Averted gaze: deference

Pupils dilated (big, wide): fear

Wide-eyed (whites of the eyes are visible): fear

Quick, darting eyes: fear

Ears

Relaxed, neutral position: calm

Forward, pricked: alert, attentive, or aggressive

Ears pinned back: fear, defensive

Mouth

Panting: Hot, anxious or excited

Lip Licking, tongue flicking: anxious

Yawn: tired or anxious

Snarl (lip curled, showing teeth): aggressive

Growl: aggressive, or playful

Bark: reactive, excited, playful, aggressive, or anxious

Tail

Up, still: alert

Up with fast wag: excited

Neutral, relaxed position: calm

Down, tucked: fear, anxious, or submissive

Stiff-wagging or still and high: agitated, excited, and perhaps unfriendly

Body carriage

Soft, relaxed: calm

Tense, stiff: alert or aggressive

Hackles up: alert or aggressive

Rolling over: submissive