

Behavior Tips: *Canine body language*

Dogs are very expressive and communicative creatures. They just happen to communicate differently than people do. Instead of being able to tell you with words what they are feeling, they tell you by making different body postures. These can be easy to understand once you learn what the body postures mean!

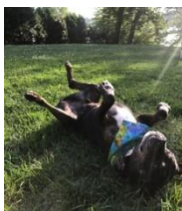
One key posture movement that dogs use is their tail! They certainly can say a lot with just a little bit of movement. The tail can mean that they are happy, unsure, or frightened. A “happy” tail wag can look like the tail is spinning in a circle like a helicopter. This means the dog is very happy and is probably greeting someone they really like. A slow, side to side tail wag that can cause the dog’s whole body to wag is generally a relaxed dog. Typically, the faster the wag the more aroused the dog is. The position of the tail compared to the ground can also tell you a lot. A tail that is held upright generally means the dog is very alert and assertive. A neutral position means the dog is comfortable and relaxed. When the tail is down or tucked between their hind legs the dog is anxious and possibly fearful. Fun fact! New research shows that when a dog first wags their tail to the right, they feel positively about what is happening. When they first wag to the left, they feel more negative.

Another big indicator of what your dog is feeling is how they are standing. Their posture and weight distribution can tell you a lot! Generally, the closer to the ground and the smaller a dog is trying to make themselves look, the more afraid they are. And when a dog rolls over and exposes their belly, it all depends on where their legs are. If their legs are tucked and over the center of the body, the dog is concerned, does not want to interact and could snap if reached for. If the legs are loose and floppy and off to the sides and the neck is exposed, the dog is unaroused, happy and relaxed. If you talk to the dog, gentle petting is likely welcome. The taller the dogs are standing with their weight on their front paws, the more alert they are. This type of alert could indicate interest, or it could lead to an aggressive behavior, depending on other body signals. A dog exhibiting playful behavior is when they are displaying the “play bow”. This is when their front end and chest is on the ground, and their haunches are up in the air and sometimes wiggling their rear end. The raised paw can be a very cute posture that some dogs are bred or trained to exhibit for hunting. However, it can also mean that your dog is unsure of something or is signaling the intention to change position or activity.

One additional indicator of dog behavior are their eyes. A “soft” eye is one that is relaxed with droopy eyelids. This means that the dog is happy or calm. A “hard” eye has lids that are alert, and the dog’s eye almost seems cold. This can mean that the dog is unhappy or aggressive. If the dog stares for a long time, that can be a threatening pose. Alternatively, if the whites of a dog’s eyes are showing because they are intermittently monitoring you while at the same time trying to look away, the dog is scared, anxious, or stressed.

Happy/ Friendly Dog

These dogs will have tails that are held in a low or body level position and will be wagging their tails in a wide sweeping motion without tension. They may have a loose circling motion to their tails. Their ears will be in a neutral position, body, mouth and eyes will be relaxed, and their tongue can be out of their mouth.



Playful Dog

Dogs often perform a play bow to initiate play. Their front legs will be stretched out, head and chest low to the ground, rump up in the air, and they will have a broad, wagging tail. Their ears are often forward, and they can go between having a tense body position to a wiggly

one. Play behaviors often vary depending on if the dog is interacting with another dog, or a human.

Relaxed/Calm Dog

When a dog is in a situation that they are familiar with their surroundings and feel comfortable, they will become calm and relaxed. These dogs may be lying down or be standing with a lowered body posture. Their eyes can be normal or almond shaped, and they will have minimal facial tone. A slow, side to side tail wag that can cause the dog’s whole body to wag is generally a relaxed dog.



Nervous/Anxious Dog

Nervous and anxious dogs are often very tense. They may have their ears back and their jaw clenched. Their eyes may be open very wide and showing the whites of their eyes, and they may be scanning the area around them. They can exhibit signals such as licking their lips, yawning, and raising a front paw, which tells others they are not a threat. Their tails are typically down, or tucked underneath themselves, and they will have a lowered body posture.



Fearful Dog

Fearful dogs often avert their gaze and will drop their ears vertically. They may be fearful enough that they drop to the ground and roll on their back to reveal their belly, but with their neck and legs tense and tucked. These dogs can become aggressive. The dogs that display fear aggression often have ears that are back, with piloerection, or hair standing up, at two points on their back (between the shoulder blades and over the rump). They may snarl or snap, showing all of their teeth and gums, along with the inside of their mouth and throat.



Alert/ Aroused Dog

These dogs can have a tail that is raised above midline and only wagging at the tip, or one that is rigid. Their ears are usually up and forward, with a tense mouth, and very large, focused eyes. Aroused dogs will have their head and shoulders shifted forward, a widened stance in the back, and may have hair that stands up along their entire back.



Aggressive Dog

Dogs that are aggressive can have an elevated, stiffly wagging tail, forward ears, and large eyes with a direct gaze. They may be barking, snarling or growling. Aggressive dogs may show their front teeth and canines without their top lip being rolled back (i.e., hiding their gums). Their bodies will be tense. Many people mistake the wagging tail as a sign that the dog is happy, but it is more of a sign that they are willing to interact. The interaction may be good, or bad, depending on what the rest of the body language is telling you.

If you have any questions or concerns about a behaviour your dog is exhibiting, please speak to your veterinarian about it.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).