



BEHAVIOR & TRAINING



YOUR DOG'S BODY LANGUAGE *by Marissa Martino, CTC*

When it comes to identifying dog behavior, most of us know the difference between fear, play and aggression. We can assume that a puppy is scared when his ears flatten against his head; his body weight shifts back and his tail tucks so tightly it touches his tummy. We know a dog is having a great time when she is bouncing around, smiling with her mouth open, and play bowing towards her owner. We can also assume that a dog is confrontational when he is baring his teeth, lunging and growling.

Even though these behaviors look very different, they are easy to identify. Just like humans, dogs have a variety of smaller, more discrete gestures they display before going to the extreme. It's important to identify these behaviors so you can help your dog be more confident in new environments and avoid unnecessary run-ins with other dogs.

The first set of behaviors to be aware of are called displacement behaviors. These behaviors are a dog's way of coping with the environment. These behaviors include ***shaking off, licking of the lips, scratching, sniffing, stretching and yawning***. You might read this list and say, "Wait, my dog yawns at night; isn't he just tired?" Or, "My dog shakes off after a bath; isn't he just wet?" The answer is yes; however, I am not talking about these moments in time. The reason these behaviors are called displacement behaviors is because they happen out of context. For example, your dog walks into the vet's office and he starts scratching all of a sudden. He then begins pacing around the waiting room and then suddenly does a shake off. Your dog is not wet, nor does he have a skin allergy. So why is he shaking and scratching? This is your dog's way of calming his nervous system, lowering his stress and dealing with the environment he deems threatening.

Most of the time I hear this phrase from my clients, "He was *fine* and then suddenly, out of nowhere, he started barking and lunging." After observing their dog's behavior, I usually discover that the dog was not *fine*, rather he was *holding it together* before his behavior escalated. In other words the dog was unsure of the situation, probably had a stiff body posture and was most likely displaying a series of displacement behaviors before he started barking and lunging. I like to think of these behaviors as yellow flags before the dog starts displaying the bright red flags, such as, lunging, growling or retreating in fear.

I encourage owners to start noticing these behaviors and more importantly, when these behaviors are taking place. For example, I notice that my dog licks his lips when meeting another dog nose to nose and then does a shake off right after the greeting. Since these behaviors help him cope with situations, I can assume he is mildly stressed during dog meets. With this information, I can then make the choice to keep my leash greetings very short, helping to avoid a negative experience for my dog and preventing him from escalating beyond the yellow flags.

The other set of behaviors that are important to identify are avoidance behaviors. I think these behaviors go the most unnoticed by owners and sometimes even other dogs. Most of my clients ask "What is the social etiquette in regards to dogs meeting on leash?" The best and most simple answer I can give them is to learn how to read the dog's body language rather than the owner's body language. I have been asked by many owners "Can my dog say hello to your dog?" Before I answer, I take a look at their dog and notice if she is offering avoidance behaviors, ***such as looking the other direction, moving away from my dog, avoiding eye contact and sniffing the ground***. All of these behaviors indicate that she would rather not meet my dog. So to save both our dogs a lot of trouble, I kindly reply; "Oh, sorry, he's in training" and I walk briskly past them.

I encourage you to change your perception and start looking at your dog's behavior more closely. By noticing these groups of subtle behaviors, you can prevent unwanted, grumpy or fearful interactions between your dog and others, and better understand what your dog is communicating through his body language.

Written by,

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