

Calming Signals: The Language of Dogs

excerpted/adapted from the work of Turid Rugaas



Dogs, being group animals, have a language for communication with each other. Canine language in general consists of a large variety of signals using body, face, ears, tail, sounds, movement, and expression. If we study the signals dogs use with each other and use them ourselves, we increase our ability to communicate with our dogs. Of particular interest are the calming signals, which are used to maintain a healthy social hierarchy and to resolve conflict within the group. These are skills which, when carried over to our own interactions with dogs can be highly beneficial to our relationship. Dogs have the ability to calm themselves in the face of fearful or stressful situations, and to calm each other as well. Dogs which do not signal properly can be the cause of problems. In order to begin seeing these signals we need to take ourselves away from established ideas and labels concerning subordination displays, displacement activities, rituals, drives and try to look at their behavior in a new way. At dog parks we have the opportunity to observe a group of dogs interacting freely, and we may see these common calming signals:

MOVING SLOWLY • MOVING IN AN ARC • SITTING • LYING DOWN • FREEZING • PLAY BOW • BLINKING, AVERTING EYES, • TURNING THE HEAD • TURNING AWAY • SNIFFING THE GROUND • YAWNING • LIP LICKING • SPLITTING • WAGGING • LIFTING PAW • SMACKING LIPS • LICKING OTHERS MOUTHS • PEEING • SHAKING OFF •

MOVING SLOWLY: A dog intending to use signals, upon seeing another dog in the distance, will start to move slowly. This exaggerated slow motion is a calming signal, and one which can be used early and effectively when meeting. For example, joggers, bicycles, and children approaching quickly may appear as a threat.

MOVING IN AN ARC: Rarely upon first meetings will dogs approach each other nose to nose. More frequently dogs approach each other in curving lines, walk beyond each other's nose to sniff rear ends while standing side to side. Most apprehensive dogs are more easily approached by people if not confronted head on, and you can help dogs approach other dogs by guiding them in an arc (sometimes quite a large arc).

SITTING, LYING: These positions are probably the most graphic calming signals of all. You can see them being used in active play sessions. A dog will spontaneously drop when things get out of control. How many dogs, when receiving a reprimand from the owner will sit or lie down?

BLINKING, AVERTING EYES, TURNING AWAY: When a dog approaches another, it's a very interesting moment in time for those individuals. Why then, do we see dogs looking away, exaggerating an eye blink or turning their heads away from approaching dogs? Is it disinterest, distraction or a calming signal? People can gain the confidence of a worried dog more quickly by avoiding direct eye contact, or even better, by turning away with their backs or sides to the dog.

SNIFFING THE GROUND: Dogs use their noses to explore their environment, but at times sniffing can be a calming signal. It can often be seen when dogs are meeting. Owners have attributed out of context sniffing as a stalling tactic. If one looks at it strictly in terms of dog behavior it is more likely being used as a calming signal in response to stress. For example: in trying to recall a dog the owner thunders, "Dog, COME". The dog approaches slowly, in a curve, then pauses to sniff. Is she being spiteful or could it be conflict resolution? Has her past experience taught her that "Come" is often followed by an unpleasant state of affairs - time to go home, time to come away from something more interesting, time to receive a punishment? What tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions is being used when calling the dog? Is the dog untrained, bad, distracted or is she trying to explain something to the owner?

YAWNING: Perhaps the most intriguing of all signals is yawning. While it's true that a dog may just be sleepy, observation will often show that the dog is using it as a calming signal. People can also use this signal to help calm a dog.

LIP LICKING: This quick little flick of the tongue is language which often goes unnoticed because it is shadowed by more overt signals.

SPLITTING: Dogs going physically between dog or people is a signal. Sometimes you'll see it when dogs are in a tight bunch and another dog will walk through. This same move can be easily done by people too. Other times you'll see it during rough play, when we may think a dog is "jealous" of the other dogs playing and is trying to get their attention, they are more likely trying to calm things down and take the pressure off.

Dogs have threatening signals just as they have calming signals. If you read the list you can see how they way people act can be interpreted as aggressive by the dog: staring, approaching head-on, standing over another dog, growling, barking, and baring their front teeth with a tight mouth. In this final segment we'll outline how humans can make use of these same signals to communicate more effectively with dogs.

The most important time to use calming signals is when meeting a dog you don't know. If a dog acts fearfully towards you or is showing signs of stress you can settle the dog by offering the same calming signals that dogs use amongst each other. First, slow down. Turning your head away and averting your gaze is an easy first signal to make. If the dog is still stressed you can turn your entire body to the side, or even turn your back on the dog. If you act like you're ignoring the dog you'll be showing calming signals, and the dog will be more likely to approach you.

It can sometimes be stressful for dogs have a person look them directly in the face, especially at their eye level. If crouching it's much better to turn sideways to the dog and look at them in your peripheral vision. Often dogs will then approach your side, as they would a dog, to avoid confrontation.

Leaning over a dog can often cause them to back away. This can happen when you are calling your dog to you, or are trying to "capture" a dog. Stand straight up. Looking down to a dog makes your gaze seem softer to the dog. If you want to approach a dog and make them comfortable, approach in a curving pattern rather than head-on, so that you pass alongside the dog.

When you go to someone's home you may find their dog still barking after you've entered the house. Try sitting down, as this can help calm the dog, along with averting your gaze as described above. If your own dog is stressed try the same thing, including lying down (on your couch or bed).

Try yawning to help a stressed dog relax. Don't worry, you can fake the yawn, just be sure to breath deeply as if you were really yawning. You can even imitate sniffing - try sitting down outside and scratching and investigating the grass (no, you don't have to stick your nose to the ground), you'll probably find a dog there very soon. Dogs are very in-tune with breathing patterns, so experiment and notice how your dog reacts.

Turning away can also be used if you have a dog jumping on you or nagging you. Simply turn your back and avert your gaze and you will often find that the dog settles down. This is partly due to your display of calming signals, but it also prevents the dog from getting reinforcement for jumping (getting handled and petted).

If roughhousing dogs are getting too rough, people often separate them by grabbing and pulling the dogs away. This usually increases tension between the dogs because you're physically putting the dogs in non-calming positions (head up and straight at the other dog with eyes wide open). You can perform splitting the way dogs do by simply walking between them. If you can walk one of the dogs away with you by chatting to them or offering a reward, even better. Often dogs just need a few seconds or a minute away to let things calm down and they can regroup successfully. It's not recommended that you walk between dogs that are in a full-fledged fight, though you may see dogs intervene in this way. Remember, use calming signals to prevent fights.

As you start to use these signals with dogs you will begin to notice the reactions they have to them. Your own dog will probably be delighted to see that you're finally learning to communicate!