

GDOC Communicating With Your Canine Calming Signals

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Background

Dogs and wolves have strong instincts for conflict solving, communication and cooperation and use body language to avoid conflicts. By learning our canine friend's body language we can communicate more closely with them and help them overcome some behaviours. We shall look upon the signals - what they are - how they are used and how you can understand your dog better and be a better owner & leader for your dog.

A Norwegian Turid Rugaas is recognised internationally as a trainer at the cutting edge of understanding canine behaviour. For many years she has been captivating audiences whilst sharing her techniques of instruction in basic manners and rehabilitation of problem behaviours using calming signals. The following quote gives the essence of Turid Rugaas's theory on calming signals.

“Dogs being flock 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. The dog's innate ability to signal is easily lost or reinforced through life's experience. If we study the signals dogs use with each other and use them ourselves, we increase our ability to communicate with our dogs. Most noteworthy of all of the canine signals are the calming

signals, which are used to maintain a healthy social hierarchy and resolution of conflict within the flock. These are skills which when carried over with our own interaction with dogs can be highly beneficial to our relationship. Dogs have the ability to calm themselves in the face of a shock (fearful or stressful situation) and to calm each other as well. As an example let's consider the manner in which dogs meet each other. Dogs which are worried in a social situation can communicate concepts such as, 'I know you are the boss around here and I won't make trouble.' Furthermore the boss dog is very apt to want the worried dog to realize that no trouble is intended. 'Don't worry, I'm in charge around here and I mean you no harm.' Dogs that do not signal properly can be the cause of problems."

Dogs use the signals as soon as there is anything to calm down. Often the signals come in quick movements, so quick that we need to really look to see them. By experience you learn to see these small flashes. Other dogs see them, even other animals, like cats. All it takes is a little practice and knowing what to look for. Their repertoire also includes threatening signals, and when we are dealing with dogs we have a choice of how to behave: we can be calming friendly reassuring, or we can be threatening. Whatever we choose will have consequences for our relationship to the dog. When you are using threats to your dog, intentionally or unintentionally, the dog will try to calm you back. For the conflict solving dog, threats must be calmed down.

Calming Signals. How to Identify and Use Them.

Turning of the Head

A signal can be a swift movement, turning his head to the side and back, or the head can be held to the side for some time. It can be just a tiny movement, or the whole head clearly to the side.

Your dog may use head turning when another dog is approaching him to tell the other dog to calm down. Maybe your dog was approached too fast, or directly head on instead of in a curve. His head may turn if you stoop over him. Maybe he stands still, but turns his head, which tells you about his discomfort in the situation.

You can use head turning yourself when a dog starts to get worried or frightened when you approach him. When a scared dog starts to bark or growl at you turn your head.

Not turning the head, but allowing the eyes only to slide to the side and look away to avert the direct stare is a signal similar to head turning. Your dog may use it when another is approaching him or when you stare at your dog or approach him front to front.

You can use it when a dog approaches you and you have difficulties in turning your head or some reason.

Shortening the eye by making the eyes look at another individual in a softer way, lowering lids and not staring in a threatening way are signals. Your dog may use them when he looks at someone straight on, and still does not want to threaten. You can use them when you are training the exercise “eye contact” making the contact softer and more friendly.

Turning Away

Turning their side or back to someone is very calming. When dogs play wildly, some of them will start turning their side or back in between playing to make things calm down a little.

Your dog may use it when another dog growls at him or behaves threatening in some way, like running up too fast, or when you use a very cross voice or go up to him when he feels that you are angry. When young dogs pester older ones, the older often turns back to make them calm down. When you jerk at the leash your dog may turn away from you, maybe pulling even more.

You can use it when a dog shows signs of nervousness or aggressiveness to you. If he jumps at you turn away, and he will most time stop. If your dog is overwhelmingly jumping and nagging you, turn your back on the dog. If you are approaching a strange dog, and suddenly you see that the dog is getting nervous, turn your back to him. In a few seconds the dog will come to you.

Yawning

Yawning is probably the most intriguing of the signals, at least people seem to enjoy using it.

Your dog may yawn when you go into the veterinarian's office, when you fight or argue in the family you hold your dog too tight when a child comes up to hug him, and a million other instances.

You can use it when your dog feels uncertain, a little bit scared, stressed, worried, or when you want him to calm down a bit. For example some dogs are easily heated up when someone is running or playing. Playing with these

dogs might end up with them biting at your trouser legs. When they start to get excited stand still, yawn a little and watch them relax.

Licking Nose

A very quick movement of the tongue, so quick that sometimes it's hard to see is a calming signal.

Your dog may use it when approaching another dog. When you bend over your dog or hold him tight, and when you bend down to grab him or talk to him in an angry voice, he may use this signal.

You cannot really use this signal it is one of the really awkward ones for people to use.

Freezing

Your dog will freeze, stop, stand, sit or lie still, without moving a muscle when a much bigger dog comes up too close and starts sniffing him all over.

A man training his dog for obedience got angry when his very young dog ran out of a long down to see some other dogs approaching in the distance. The man got very angry and started to yell with real aggression in his voice. The dog stopped and stood quite still. He didn't dare to move. The man ran up to him and really gave him the treatment for being so "stubborn". When in fact the dog wasn't being "Stubborn" but trying to calm its owner.

Walking Slowly Using Slow Movements

Movements that get slower, sometimes so slow that there is hardly any movement at all have a very calming effect.

Your dog may use it when another dog is seen. The slow movements start at the sight of the other dog. They start when you call for your dog, and you are a bit irritable or commanding in your voice. They start when there are a lot of things happening around the dog, and he tries to calm things down. When you jump and wave and scream a lot to make the dog run faster, you will often get the opposite. The dog gets slower to calm you down.

You say “down” in a harsh way. Your dog gets down, but very slowly, because he has to calm the anger in your voice.

You can use it when a dog seems frightened of you, or when you do not want to scare a dog. When you go up to a dog that you want to put a leash on. The slower you move the better chance you have of making him stand still.

Play Position

Getting down with front legs in a bowing position can be an invitation to play, if the dog is moving legs from side to side in a playful manner. If he stands still, in a bow, the possibility for it being a calming signal is high.

Your dog may use this when he wants to become friends with another dog who is a little sceptical or nervous. He may use the bow when he meets another animal (horse or cow) he does not feel too sure about. You can use it by stretching your arms, like when you yawn, but stretch down.

Sitting Down

Either turning back to you while sitting down, or just sitting down when a dog is approaching is a signal. Your dog may use it when another dog is making him feel uncertain or when you yell to make him come. You can use it. Sit when your dog is stressed and cannot relax. Make your guests sit down if you have a dog who is not quite sure about strangers.

Down

Lying down on his back, belly up, is submission. Lying down with belly to the ground is a calming act. It is a very strong one too, often used by high ranking dogs who are leaders of the pack.

Your dog may use it as a puppy when playing gets too rough or as an adult when young ones seem to be scared of him. When they get tired during play and want the others to calm down they may use it.

You can use it when your dog is stressed and nagging you. Lie down on the lounge. When a dog is feeling scared of you and not daring to come closer, lie down. In many cases he will be right there.

SNIFFING

Sniffing can be a swift movement down to the ground or the floor, and up again, or it can be persistently standing there for some time until the problem situation is over.

As dogs also sniff to actually sniff smells, one has to see the whole situation to be sure what it is.

Your dog may use it when another dog is approaching him, when someone is walking straight at him, or when a sudden situation occurs, eg, two dogs very suddenly being too close. When you walk along the road and someone is walking directly at you, maybe carrying a big hat or something, your dog may sniff. When you call your dog and you are a bit annoyed or commanding in

your voice, or maybe standing with full front to the dog, your dog will sniff several times while coming.

You cannot really use it. I find it hard to practice sniffing. But something like it can be used, you sitting down, scratching the grass or something.

Dogs seem to use sniffing a lot when they communicate.

Are there any questions.

Thank you for your attention to-day.