

Speaking Dog

Happy

A happy dog and content dog is simply – relaxed. He may have an open mouth or the corners of his mouth might be turned upwards slightly. His tail may sway gently from side to side, curl loosely or just be held in a relaxed position. His ears will be relaxed as will his facial expressions.

Aroused

An aroused dog is one who is intensely focused on something (like chasing a squirrel) and ready for action. You may see his ears forward or flattened, mouth closed, body weight on all four legs, a tail held high or a low, very deliberate tail wag, tense eyes directed at what he what he has detected, and the hair on his back may be raised. These are signs that now would NOT be a good time to encourage your child to pet the dog.

Fearful

When a dog is feeling afraid, his tail will be held low or tucked between his legs; and his ears will be sideways for an erect eared dog or flattened back with rapid panting; and his eyes will be tense. You may see the whites around the sides of his eyes. His muscles will be tense and his center of gravity will either be over his rear legs ready for a quick retreat or to one side so that he can recoil. He may also bark and retreat, turn his head away, or walk away.

The dog may also be exhibiting displacement behaviors – behaviors that are normal except at a time of conflict. When you see one of these displacement behaviors, it is very important reduce that dog's stress in the moment (such as redirecting a child from laying on the dog) and also use positive training strategies for teaching the dog to associate those scary actions or things with good consequences.

I have seen so many videos describing the dog bite as coming from complete surprise when a careful eye shows the dog trying to communicate his discomfort with calming signals, only to have those signals ignored – which escalated the situation ultimately to a bite.

Sample displacement behaviors include: yawning when not tired, sudden scratching when not itchy, licking chocks without the presence of food, sudden sniffing of the ground, wet dog shake when not wet or dirty. All dogs should have a safe place they can go to (such as a crate or corner) where they can go and know they will be left alone.

Imminent Bite Coming

If the dog freezes and becomes stiff, stands with his front legs splayed and his head low and focused on you, shows his teeth and growls - absolutely, positively, you need to stop interaction with him immediately, look away and give the dog a chance to leave. Do not approach the dog, talk to him or make eye contact. If you are trying to get something the dog has, it is best to let it go.

A note on growling: Growling is a very important communication tool for dogs to tell us they are extremely uncomfortable and have almost reached their threshold. If you punish your dog for growling, you are suppressing his ability to warn you non-aggressively that his next step will be a bite. Guess what you will be encouraging if you do that? Instead, allow your dog to warn you and back off and evaluate the stressors in the environment. A behavior modification plan using positive reinforcement strategies can help desensitize him to the stressor and re-associate the stressor to good consequences.



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