

## Dog Body Language: Understanding Canine Communication Signals And Emotions

### Speaker Key

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### Transcript

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SG If you spend any time on social media chances are you will have seen a video where somebody has a family pet and a young toddler or a baby in very precarious situations. And honestly it makes me turn away and gives me a pain in my stomach because it's unnecessarily dangerous and the dog is giving them clear, clear information with their body language on what they're feeling at that moment. And so, I decided we needed a podcast on that dog and your dog's body language.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. What I'm gonna do right now is I'm gonna roll a video of an 11-week-old Australian Shepherd puppy and a three-and-a-half-year-old Australian Shepherd adult. Now a student of mine owns both of these dogs and when he and his wife were gonna come for the lesson I said, "What's up this week? What's keeping you awake at night with your puppy?"

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And he said, "She really is acting inappropriately to our adult dog Bling." And I said, "Well, bring Bling along." And so those of you listening to this podcast, as you can guess, it's about body language. So, at some point I'd strongly encourage you to jump over here to YouTube and watch this episode.

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However, I think it's an episode that you really will get value from, from just listening to as well. So, you can start to visualize what I'm talking about in your dog's body language. Now with the clip that I just rolled between those two Aussies, I will put it in slow motion at the end of today's podcast. Because I want you to have a look and see what I saw.

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The body language was super clear from that adult dog but unfortunately most people would look at them and go, "Oh look, they're playing. Look at that. It's so cool." Why would they think that? Because in a 50 second period of time that adult dog went into what appeared to be a play bow 15 times. "Heck, I saw 15 play bows in 50 seconds Susan. Clearly that adult dog is saying, "Yeah, game on! This is so much fun!"

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What you may have missed is a sign of obvious stress in that dog. And what I'm going to do right now is I want to walk you through how the dog uses different body parts to communicate how they're feeling. Now what I hope everybody's gonna get from this is number one, I'd like you to start videoing your dog's interactions.

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With other dogs maybe. With family members. With you. Turn on a camera when you're sitting on the couch and reading a book and you start patting your dog. Stop patting. What happens? Does your dog move away and say, "I've had enough?" Does your dog lean in and say, "That was good let's keep going."?



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Your dog is constantly giving you clear communication. And what I'd like from you is to be able to see when your dog is saying 'I'm relaxed and content'. When your dog with their body language is saying 'I would like your attention' or 'I'm feeling a little agitated or anxious', 'I'm feeling afraid', 'I'm feeling stressed', 'I'm feeling worried', 'I'm feeling extremely fearful'.

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Now there's some obvious ways that our dogs may show those emotions but there's a lot more less obvious ways that I would love for you to know about. I'm gonna go through those today. And I would like you to start watching those videos, maybe freezing those videos at certain points and saying, "Hey, I just saw my dog's tongue just dart out from between his teeth, just for a second and then it went right back in his mouth. I wonder if that means something?"

Yes, it does. And that's what we're going to talk about today. So just so I don't forget, I'm not gonna leave this today and I'm gonna recommend my four favorite books that are really going to help you understand what I'm talking about. Probably the most popular book on how your dog tries to give you clear communication.

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It's called [On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals](#) and is by Turid Rugaas. Now, this is a book that every single human being that teaches anybody about dog training really has to know inside out and back in front. Now there's another book. It's a lot more expensive, but this is another great book. It's called [Canine Body Language](#) and it's by Brenda Aloff. I love that book because it's a pictorial, a dictionary towards really understanding dog's body language.

The other two that I like are - this is an oldie, I really don't even know if you can get it anymore - it's called [Body Posture & Emotions](#) by Suzanne Clothier. And the final one I'm gonna recommend is Lili Chin's [Doggie Language](#). Okay. So those are the books that are really going to be super helpful to you to understand what your dog is trying to communicate to you.

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Now let's just walk through the different body parts. Now starting with the tail. Podcast [episode number 4](#), I talked about TEMP. That was a really simple overview of looking at [dogs emotions](#). But guess what, dogs emotions are a lot like ours in that they're complex. When somebody says, "Uh what's wrong?" "Nothing!" Now we might be saying one thing, but our body is going to be saying something else.

So, it isn't always cut and dry, but I'm going to give you a really gross overview in this short little podcast episode at things that you can be on the lookout for. So, number one, let's look at the tail. Obviously, everybody knows that a dog with a slow rhythmic wag in conjunction with a relaxed body, relaxed face, relaxed mouth, relaxed ears is a happy dog. But did you know that a dog that is anxious will often wag his tail only to the left.

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You look at this clip of my puppy This! when she was quite young and she was resource guarding, you can see when Tater Salad comes into the room, and she gets upset her tail wags only to the left. You're going to see this with a lot of dogs when they're feeling anxious, stressed, fearful, the tail goes left.



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Now a dog may tail wag to the right when they're feeling a little submissive or when they're feeling relaxed, but most people just go, "Oh, that's a tail wag!" A tail wag that is right up over the hips, stiff and vibrating along with a fixed gaze is a dangerous tail wag. It's a tail wag of a dog showing great anxiety about the person, the animal, the child, the environment. And when dogs show great anxiety, it's fight, flight, freeze. We need to do something to help them.

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So, tails can be low wagging between the hocks. That's a sign of a dog that's a little bit of worried. It can go up along the belly. So, you've got to look for these signs along with other signs in the body, which we're gonna talk about because it all paints a picture together.

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For example, my dog This! is a submissive dog so she will tail wag very, very low when she [greet new people](#). And so, you could isolate that and go, "Oh, that's a dog who is super anxious and fearful and might bite." But if you look at the rest of her body you can see it's very relaxed and she is a happy dog. It's just a low tail wag.

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So, let's go from the tail to the E, the eyes. So, a dog who is got very squinty eyes, they may be showing submission, they may be showing another dog a calming signal. Now that's the title of one of the books that I suggested and what does that mean? That means the dog's trying to communicate 'let's regulate, I'm regulating myself'.

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They may do it for themselves alone. They may do it for a child that's nearby or for an adult or for another dog. So, there's a lot of parts of the body that's involved with calming signals and an eye squinting maybe one of them. Eye squinting maybe also a dog that's showing sheer joy 'this is amazing'.

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Another calming signal done with the eyes the more common one is a dog that blinks. A lot of frequent blinking. You can see this with Swagger interacting with his doodle that he does a lot of fast blinking. And you can do that yourself. I'll get to that more near the end of the podcast, about how we can mirror calming signals to our dogs.

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So, eyes that are fixed in one direction, that's not a relaxed gaze. Eyes that you can see the whites of the eye, sometimes called a whale eye, that's a dog who is very, very anxious. Are they very, very afraid? Are they ready to bolt? Are they ready to fight? They are a dog that is not relaxed.

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Along with that you will see the skin around the eyes will show facial tension to support what the eyes are expressing. So, you might see all of a sudden skin wrinkling up between the eyes, or you might see tension in the skin being pulled back towards the ears because the eyes and the ears are gonna work together. Eyes and ears and tail, along with all the other communication that the dog is giving you is going to paint a picture of what's going on in that dog's brain at that moment.



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So, ears that are loose and hanging naturally, that's a relaxed dog most of the time. Ears that start rotating back, they may be locating sounds in behind them, they may be showing great anxiety. Rotating back maybe rose budding flop ears, might start rose budding in that they start curling at the top. Ears that are normally prick might rotate back or flatten to the head.

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So, dogs who are really anxious you'll see the pupils dilate as well, they'll get huge because they're getting ready to bolt. If they can bolt, they are bolting. So, let's stay on the head. We've done the ears, we've done the eyes, we've done the face. Now you'll see wrinkles in a number of places, but the most common ones will be between the eyes just on the outside of the eyes and the mouth.

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So, a dog that has a lot of tension in their body, or they're stressed, you'll find that they'll pull their mouth back and you'll see a little wrinkle in the corner of their mouth. They might be open mouth panting. You might see their breathing is definitely going to change. It's going to get more elevated. The tongue may get long, and it may get curled at the end called spatulating. That's just stress.

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Now it could be stress from working too long in the heat they're overheated. So, you might see a spatulated tongue for that. But again, putting all these other things together. Now I talked about tongue flicking where you just see a little bit of the tongue coming up from between the teeth. That is a dog who is showing that they are a little bit anxious.

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The tongue flicking may come up over the nose. That could be a calming signal to another dog that 'I'm de-stressing my body', 'I'm showing you all these other things along with the tongue'. We look at the dog's gaze. They may look away, avert their eyes from the dog that's oncoming or the child that's nearby.

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So, you get the tongue flicking, you get the eyes or the whole head turning away. Another probably the most common signal that people are aware of is when dog's yawn. We often call them stress yawning. When the dog is giving these big open mouth yawns. Again, it maybe that the dog is regulating their body.

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They're giving a clear message that "I'm just letting you know I am feeling a tad uncomfortable with what's going on. I'm just going to de-regulate de-stress myself with these big yawns."

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You can actually yawn at your dog and help them to de-regulate because a lot of dogs will mirror you if you blink and yawn. Which is why I tell my students all the time when they're going into the agility ring, if you're tense and barely breathing guess what, dogs are great at mirroring us. So that's how if you have a dog that you're worried with them around other dogs and you see another dog and you start hyperventilating and all— I know it's hard but if you can relax you are gonna help mirror the emotions you want your dog to take on at that time.



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Now let's look at the dogs just the posture of their head. A dog that lowers their head to sniff. Sniffing is a good thing. And now they might not be sniffing anything in particular but that's sniffing another clear calming sign to another dog "I'm okay. I'm de-regulating over here. You do you, I'll do me. Everything is gonna be fine."

And you can see in the video where [This! did growl at Tater](#) when he came in the room when there was a bowl of food in the room, that that's what Tater did. He's like, "Yeah, this carpet looks really interesting. I think I'm just gonna like have a big sniff and then I'm just gonna leave the room because I don't want to deal with this anymore."

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A head that's lowered, a head that's sniffing, it could be that they're looking to defuse the situation. Head that's turned away along with a body that's bent away is a sign that the dog is okay with you being there, but they are just showing you that that's a little bit of a calming sign. All of these things together is what's giving us information about the dog's emotions.

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You cannot take one thing in particular and say, "I know what's going on now." That's why I'm encouraging you to video your own dog. Now, a dog that puts their head up, they may be curious. They may be seeing something that they're interested in. But they also might be posturing. Dogs like to— of course we think dogs go at other dogs with their mouth, but they also might just head bob another dog just to say, "Hey, give me some space. Get me out of here. You are too close."

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So, the head is another great telltale sign. Okay. Our dog's posture. A dog that's getting low is a dog that's stressing. Now a dog may go into a bow to tell another dog, "Hey, I want to have a little run. You want to have a little run?" If they play bow and go forward, maybe even you'll see a little wag of the back end, that's a dog who is making an invitation.

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It may be reciprocated. But if it's a play bow that's held, it may be trying to de-stress a situation. You see that a lot around puppies. Adult dogs might hold, and freeze might be even turning away trying to defuse puppies that are getting a little bit out of hand. So that play bow doesn't always mean 'I want to play'. A play bow with a dog spinning away from the other dog, maybe this dog wants to play but this dog's saying "I don't feel comfortable playing."

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So, they'll constantly be moving away, moving away from the dog that actually saying "No, come on. Let's go. Let's go." True play, when you see two dogs playing you want to see a give and take. Oftentimes you'll see one dog self-handicapping which is something Momentum constantly does.

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She'll play up and then she flips onto her back because obviously you can't be as big a threat when you're on your back. So, she's self-handicapping to let the other dog know that "Yeah, it's okay. This is good. We can have fun." And then she might get up and run a little bit, play bow and come in and flip over again.





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So that posture is very clear. Posture that's stiff, if a dog gets very stiff with their back end and forward or recesses back, they're showing some signs of fear. "My legs are locked back here. I might go a little bit forward, but my back legs are locked." Locking the legs, dogs are ready to leave. They are not relaxed.

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And the whole body should show relaxation and even the fur. So, a dog that stressed the fur will, may stick up on end. You might suddenly see dander in your dog's coat. You might suddenly see the dog start shedding in a moment of severe stress. If you've ever had a dog afraid of the veterinary clinic you might say, "Oh why are they shedding? This is embarrassing. I brush them all the time." It's just another one of your dog's signs that they're telling you "I'm not comfortable with this environment at this moment."

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So, let's look at the dog's posture. When the top line is flat and everything you see the shoulders relaxed, that's a relaxed dog. When you see as we did in the video with the Aussie, the back end in that play bow was tight. It was under the dog's body. A dog may have a rounded top line. And our Aussie did show us that in that video as well. A rounded top line that's saying, 'I am not comfortable'.

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Now, what we want to see from a dog who is showing relaxation is what we call a shake off, where they give a whole-body shake to try and de-stress to neutralize the situation or to say to another dog or a person, "Hey, I'm okay here. You can just move away, and everyone will be happy. This is good." It's a calming signal that the dog is telling you that it's time we moved on from this.

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Along with that dog's posture, you may see a dog lift one paw. One paw lift is a dog saying "I'm a little bit anxious. I'm a little uneasy with what's going on." All of these things— a lot of Terriers will just lift their paws. Hey, Pointers lift their paw all the time, don't they? But it's the motion in conjunction with any of these other signs. Okay.

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I think I've given a general overview of many different parts of the dog's body. We haven't even talked about the teeth, you know, and we haven't talked about vocalization.

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But I don't want to go any deeper into this. If we need a part two and a part three and a part four, we are going to do it. Right now, I want to roll the video that I showed you at the beginning of this podcast and what I would like you to do is I would like you to see if you can identify when the dog goes into a bow and then rolls away from the puppy. How many times do you see that happening?

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Can you identify— now you have to be really careful to see the tongue flicks, where the tongue just comes out between the teeth. You'll see several of those. The shake offs that the adult dog does. The number of times that the adult dog tries to ask the owner by locking eyes, "Please help me. Please get me out."



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There are at least four, maybe five times where that dog looks to escape. Looks up the wall, looks up the panel of the gating, looking for an escape. The clear, obvious sign that the dog wasn't enjoying himself was when he was asked to jump out or when she was asked to jump out, she didn't hesitate. She came right out immediately.

But there was one or two signs where the dog vocalized. It wasn't being hurt. It was vocalizing to say, "This is enough. I am done here." You'll see here creating space by bopping the puppy, sometimes using her mouth to push the puppy away in order to get away. You will see the dog's breathing change.

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Watch the beginning video, watch the ending. You'll see all of this within that short little 50 seconds will tell you so much. Look at how the dog's facial tension, ears, and posture change the moment it sees that puppy. And that cascades into all of the calming signals and signs of tension and stress that she's trying to communicate with her owner to say, "please help me".

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Now I recognize if you're listening to this podcast, there's a lot that you have to visualize. So, you might want to jump over here to YouTube and watch it. What I'd like you to do is when you're watching this, write in the comments the time marks where you picked up this. "I picked up this—" "I saw this—" and the time marks.

And please start videoing your dog, screen capping things within that video. Make it a game with your family. "What does this mean when you see this?" "What do you think this means?" "Well, let's line it up with this podcast Susan did or with one of the books that Susan suggested." This has been a really long podcast, but I hope it is seriously helpful.

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And I really hope if you ever see one of those videos on social media, for the sake of the child that might get bit and the sake of the dog that's going to be put in a precarious situation, you are not afraid to leave a comment and say, "Hey refer to this podcast, because you're gonna learn that your dog was showing a lot of signs of anxiety and stress, not happiness." I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 25: Why All Dogs Can Bite and How to Reduce the Risk with R.E.A.D.](#)

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[YouTube Playlist: The Emotional State of Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Book - On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas](#)

[Book - Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog by Brenda Aloff](#)

[Book - Body Posture & Emotions: Shifting Shapes, Shifting Minds by Suzanne Clothier](#)

[Book - Doggie Language: A Dog Lover's Guide To Understanding Your Best Friend by Lili Chin](#)

[Podcast Episode 121: How To Stop Dogs Jumping Up On People](#)

[Podcast Episode 66: Resource Guarding: Dog vs Dog Aggression](#)



## Dog Body Language: Understanding Canine Communication Signals And Emotions

### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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