

CALMING SIGNALS – The Art of Survival

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For species who live in packs, it's important to be able to communicate clearly with one another. Clear communication enables them to cooperate when they hunt, to bring up their offspring, and perhaps most importantly: to live in peace with each other. Conflicts are dangerous - they cause physical injuries and a weakened pack, which is something that no pack can afford - it will cause them to go extinct.

Dogs live in a world of sensory input: visual, olfactory, auditory perceptions. They easily perceive tiny details - a quick signal, a slight change in another's behavior, the expression in another's eyes. Pack animals are so perceptive to signals that a horse can be trained to follow the contraction in our pupils and a dog can be trained to answer your whispering voice. There's no need to shout commands, to make the tone of our voice deep and angry – this is referred to as “swatting flies with a shovel.”

There are at least 30 recognized “calming signals.” Some dogs have an incredibly rich "vocabulary," while some use only a few. It varies from dog to dog. The signals are international and universal. An elkhound in an isolated valley in Norway would understand a dog from Japan. They will have no communication problems!

The problem

Dogs try to use this communication system with humans, simply because it's the language they know and think everyone understands. By failing to recognize calming signals, and perhaps even punishing the dog for using them, we risk causing harm to our dogs. Some dogs may simply give up using the calming signals, including with other dogs. Others may get so desperate and frustrated that they get aggressive, nervous or stressed out as a result.

Basic knowledge

Dad has learned in class that he needs to sound strict and dominant so that Prince will understand who is in charge. Prince finds dad's voice to be threatening, so he instantly gives dad a calming signal in order to make him stop being aggressive. Prince will perhaps lick his own nose, yawn, turn away - which will result in dad becoming angry for real, because dad perceives Prince as being pig-headed, stubborn and disobedient. Prince is punished for using his calming signals. This is a typical example of something that happens on an everyday basis with many dog owners.

We need to learn to understand the language of dogs so that we can understand what our dogs are telling us. That is the secret of having a good life together.

When dogs use calming signals

The following is a list of some typical situations that dogs are naturally uncomfortable with and try to communicate their discomfort with calming signals.

- A person bending over him
- direct, prolonged eye contact
- a person's face too close to his own face (eg, kissing on the nose)
 - when someone sounds angry
 - when there's yelling and quarreling in the family
 - when someone is walking directly at the dog
 - when the dog is excited with happiness and anticipation (for instance by the door when you are about to go for a walk)
 - when you ask the dog to do something he doesn't feel like doing
 - when your training sessions are too long and the dog gets tired
 - when he is confused
 - when a person hugs him
 - when he feels trapped

THE SIGNALS

1. Licking/tongue flicks

Licking is a signal that is used often, especially by black dogs, dogs with a lot of hair around their faces, and others who's facial expressions for some reason are more difficult to see than those of dogs with lighter colors, visible eyes and long noses. But anyone can use licking, and all dogs understand it no matter how quick it is. The quick little lick on the nose is easier to see if you watch the dog from in front. Sometimes it's nothing more than a very quick lick, the tip of the tongue is barely visible outside the mouth, and only for a short second. But other dogs see it, understand it and respond to it. Any signal is always returned with a signal.

2. Sniffing the ground

Sniffing the ground is a frequently used signal. You will see this a lot in groups of dogs, when you and your dog are out walking and someone is coming towards you, in places where there's a lot going on, in noisy places, or when seeing objects that the dog isn't sure of and finds intimidating, etc.

Sniffing the ground may look anything like moving the nose swiftly down toward the ground and back up again, to sticking the nose to the ground and sniffing persistently for several minutes.

Is someone approaching you on the pavement? Take a look at your dog. Did he drop the nose down toward the ground, even slightly? Did he turn his side to the one approaching and sniff the side of the road?

Of course, dogs sniff a lot, in order to "read the paper" and enjoy themselves. Dogs are pre-programmed to use their noses and it's their favorite activity. However, sometimes it's calming - it depends on the situation. So pay attention to when and in which situations the sniffing occur!

3. Turning away/turning of the head

The dog can turn his head slightly to one side, turn the head completely over to the side, or turn completely around so that the back and tail is facing whoever the dog is calming. This is one of the signals you may see most of the time in dogs.

When someone is approaching your dog from in front, he will probably turn away in one of these ways. When you seem angry, aggressive or threatening, you may also see one of these variations of the signal. When you bend over a dog to stroke him, he may turn his head away from you. When the dog is taken by surprise or takes someone by surprise, he will turn away quickly. The same happens when someone is staring or acting in a threatening way.

In most cases, this signal will make the other dog calm down. It's a fantastic way in which to solve conflicts, and it's used a lot by all dogs, whether they are puppies or adults, high or low ranking, and so on. Allow your dog to use it! Dogs are experts at solving and avoiding conflicts - they know how to deal with conflicts.

4. Play bow

Going 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. Just as often, the dog is standing still while bowing and is using the signal to calm someone down. These signals often have double meanings and may be used in many different ways - often the invitation to play is a calming signal by itself because the dog is making a potentially dangerous situation less tense and diverts with something safe.

Recently, in a puppy class with a mix of puppies, one of them was afraid of the others in the beginning. The others left him alone and respected his fear. In the end he would dare to approach the others. When he did, he went into a play bow as soon as one of the other dogs looked at him. It was an obvious combination of slight fear of the others, as well as wanting to take part in the playing.

When two dogs approach each other too abruptly, you will often see a play bow. This is one of the signals that are easy to see, especially because they remain standing in the bow position for a few seconds so that you have plenty of time to observe it.

5. Walking slowly

High speed can be upsetting to many dogs, and they might want to go in to try and stop the one who is running. This is partly a hunting behavior and is triggered by the sight of a running human or dog. If the one running is coming straight at the dog, it involves a threat and a defense mechanism sets in.

A dog that is insecure tends to move slowly. If you wish to make a dog feel safer, then you can move slower. When I see a dog react to me with a calming signal, I immediately respond by moving slower.

Is your dog coming very slowly when you call him? If so, check the tone of your voice - do you sound angry or strict? That may be enough for him to want to calm you down by walking slowly. Have you ever been angry with him when he came to you? Then this may be why he doesn't trust you. Another reason to calm you may be if the dog is always put on a leash when coming when called. Take a look at your dog the next time you call him. Does he give you any calming signals when coming? If he moves slowly, you may need to do something different in the way you act.

6. Freezing

"Freezing" is when the dog stops abruptly and remains completely still, often looking out of the corner of his eye. This behavior is believed to have something to do with hunting behavior - when the prey is running, the dog attacks. Once the prey stops, the dog will stop too. We can often see this when dogs are chasing cats. This behavior, however, is used in several different situations. When you get angry and aggressive and appear threatening, the dog will often freeze and not move in order to help you calm down. Other times the dog may walk slowly, freeze, and then move slowly again. Very often a dog will stop and remain still when someone is approaching. Should your dog be in a conflict situation with a human or dog and is unable to escape, freezing may be one attempt to calm the other dog or person.

7. Sitting down

To sit down, or an even stronger signal, to sit down with the back turned towards someone - for instance the owner - has a very calming effect. It's often seen when one dog wants to calm another dog who is approaching too quickly. Dogs may sit down with their backs turned against the owner when he or she sounds too strict or angry.

8. Walking in a curve

This signal is frequently used as a calming signal, and it is the main reason why dogs may react so strongly towards meeting dogs when they are forced to approach head on. Their instincts tell them that it's wrong to approach someone like that. Forcing dogs to approach each other head on can cause them to feel anxious and defensive, and can eventually result in aggressive behavior like barking and lunging at other dogs.

Dogs, when given a chance, will walk in curves around each other. This is what they do when they meet off leash and are free to do things their own way. Allow your dog to do the same when he's with you. Some dogs need large curves, while others only need a slight curve. Allow the dog decide what feels right and safe for him, then, in time, he can learn to pass other dogs closer. Don't make your dog walk in a heel position while you're approaching someone - give him a chance to walk in a curve up to or past the person or other dog. If you keep the leash loose and let the dog decide, you will often see that the dog chooses to walk away instead of getting hysterical.

For the same the reason, people should not walk directly toward a dog, but walk up to it in a curve. The more anxious or aggressive the dog is, the wider you should make the curve.

9. Other calming signals

By now you have learned about some of the more common calming signals. There are many more that have yet to be described. I will mention a few more briefly so that you can make further observations:

- Yawning
- "Smiling", either by pulling the corners of the mouth up and back, or by showing the teeth as in a grin.
- Wagging the tail - should a dog show signs of anxiety, calming or anything that clearly has little to do with happiness, a wagging tail isn't always an expression of happiness.
- Urinating, marking
- Making the face round and smooth with the ears close to the head in order to act like a puppy. (No one will harm a puppy, is what the dog believes)
- Some dogs act like puppies, jumping around and act silly, throwing sticks around, etc. if they discover a fearful dog nearby. This is intended to have a calming effect.

Never force dogs into meeting others

Allow the dogs to use their language in meeting situations so that they feel safe. Sometimes they will walk up to each other and get along, other times they feel that it's safer to stay at a distance - after all, they have already read each other's signals, they do so even at a several hundred meters distance - there's no need to meet face to face.

In Canada, dog trainers who attended my lecture came up with a new name of these calming signals: "The Language of Peace." That's exactly what it is. It's a language that is there to make sure that dogs have a way to avoid and solve conflicts and live together in a peaceful manner. And the dogs are experts at it.

Start observing and you will see for yourself. Most likely, you will get a much better relationship with your dog and other dogs, too, once you begin to realize what the dog is really telling you. It's likely that you will understand things you previously were unable to figure out. It is incredibly exciting, as well as educational.

Welcome to the world of the dog, and to knowledge of a whole new language!