

Canine Calming Signals

Dogs use calming or "cut off" signals (also called displacement behaviors) to calm down or cease aggression/reduce stress in their environment. The signals are used at an early state to prevent things from happening, avoiding threats from people and dogs, calming down nervousness, fear, noise and unpleasant stimuli. The signals are used for calming themselves when they feel stressed or uneasy. The signals are used to make the others involved feel safer and understand that intentions are of goodwill. They are used to make friends with other dogs and people. Dogs have strong instincts for conflict solving, communication and cooperation.

Dogs also have 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 in our relationship with our dog. When you are using threats to your dog, intentionally or unintentionally, the dog will try to calm you down. For the conflict solving dog, threats must be calmed down. So, it is to the benefit in our relationship with our dog to understand these signals, and to use them ourselves to increase the communication level we have with our dog.

Head Motion & Eye Contact

The dog may turn their head to the side, either briefly or for a prolonged period. If you see this, you can counter their body language by mirroring the action. They may keep their head facing you, but avert their eyes to avoid eye contact. You can mirror this action, especially if you are unable to turn your head or neck easily. Intense eye contact can be considered a threat. Alternatively the dog may lower their lids and stare softly. This is different from a hard, wide-eyed or tense stare that indicates threat.

Turning Away

A dog may turn away from another dog when play becomes too intense and they want things to calm down. You may notice if one dog is getting overwhelmed in a play group, they may turn their back or side to the other dog. If a dog is showing other signs of nervousness or aggression toward you, turning away can signal to them that you are not a threat. This can also be helpful to remember when a dog is jumping on you - turning your back to them will signal to them that you aren't interested in that action.

Nose or Lip Licking

Sometimes this one can be easy to miss. A nervous or overwhelmed dog may lick their nose or lips to calm themselves.

Freezing

A dog may freeze and stand, sit or lie completely still if they feel alarmed at a person or dog approaching them.

Slow Movements

Dogs may slow all of their movements way down in order to assure their perceived threat that they will not attempt any sudden movements. This is why behavior specialists will tell you to approach new or fearful dogs very slowly.

The Choice is Yours

How you approach a dog, especially if they are already nervous or scared, will make a huge difference in how the interaction goes. Whether you mean to frighten or threaten a dog or not, you can easily do so if you are ignoring their signs of stress, or calming signals. Walking up to a new dog, you will be more successful if you approach slowly, avoid direct eye contact, turn your body slightly to the side and crouch down to their level. Even if you are a dog owner who is sometimes surprised by your dog's fearful behavior, the above signals will help you determine when your dog is about to become overwhelmed, and you can intervene to remove the stress-inducing factors.