



The Face of Fear

Dogs express fear through body language and vocalization. To effectively modify your dog's fearful behavior, you must become familiar with his body language and fear response patterns. Learning your dog's characteristic responses will allow you to recognize when his fear is being triggered, even at the lowest level. With practice, you will be able to intervene immediately and break the chain of escalating anxiety so the reaction does not become extreme. If your dog tends to display fear by defensively lunging or biting, you will be able to short-circuit the process before harm can be done. Recognizing and monitoring your dog's reactions is also crucial when practicing behavior modification exercises, so that you can adjust the protocols based on your observations.

The first observable sign that your dog is afraid might be as subtle as a flick of the ear, a twitch of the lip, or a slight tensing of the musculature. As fear levels increase, these and other signals become more obvious.

Common Audible Signals	Common Visible Signals	Miscellaneous Subtle Signals
whining	dilated pupils	sweaty paw pads
whimpering	tensed muscles	shedding fur/dandruff
growling	trembling	"clingy"/leaning on owner
barking	pacing	restlessness, hyperactivity
howling	extreme salivation/ drooling <i>or</i>	vigilantly scans environment
yelping	decreased salivation	shallow breathing or panting
screaming	rapid <i>or</i> very slow	"shaking off" (as if wet)
	blinking	stretching
	yawning	moving very slowly
<i>Extreme:</i> anal sac expression, loss of bladder/sphincter control, vomiting		

Dogs who are habitually anxious may develop repetitive behaviors such as licking at paws or chewing at other body parts. Repetitive stress-related behaviors are called *stereotypies* (pronounced “stereo-tip-ees”). If ritualized, chronic, and difficult to interrupt, they are termed *obsessive-compulsive disorders* (OCDs). While stereotypies may disappear with increased exercise and mental stimulation, OCDs are best treated with professional assistance, as they may require pharmacological intervention.

Body Language

Like any other language, canine body language must be studied in order to become fluent. Instead of learning individual words, you must first learn the significance of each individual body part’s position and movement. One body part—for example, the tail—can convey volumes about a dog’s emotional state. Then, just as words are combined into sentences, individual body signals must be interpreted in conjunction with others to paint a full picture of the dog’s internal state. Learning to read your dog’s body language is a labor of love that will open the door to improved understanding and communication. Once you are fluent, you will be able to interpret his emotional states correctly, even as they fluctuate from moment to moment.

Ears and Tail: The most widely recognized canine fear posture is distinguished by flattened ears and a tucked tail. The degree to which these signals occur is in direct correlation to the degree of fear the dog is experiencing. A dog who takes notice of a potential threat might flick an ear back and lower his tail slightly, but reassume a more relaxed posture once he has determined there is no need for concern. A dog who is extremely frightened is more likely to flatten his ears against his skull and curl his tail completely under so it covers the ano-genital region.

Becoming familiar with the position of your dog’s ears when he is feeling relaxed will help you to recognize when the ears are held back in a fearful or submissive response, or held forward in a confident or even aggressive display. If you have a flop-eared dog such as a Cocker Spaniel, changes in ear position will not be as obvious as they are in a prick-eared dog such as a Siberian Husky. Begin to take note of the position of your

dog's ears when he meets other dogs and people, and when he encounters something that frightens him.



Note the body language of the fearful/submissive pup on the right. The ears are laid back, the eyes elongated; the tongue protrudes slightly (more on that soon), and a paw is raised in a gesture of appeasement.

It is also important to note the normal, relaxed position of your dog's tail. The tails of some breeds, such as Basset Hounds and Beagles, are set moderately high and curve slightly. Some spitz-type breeds, such as Alaskan Malamutes and Akitas, have extremely high-set tails that curl over the back. Many sighthounds, such as Greyhounds and Whippets, have low-set tails that are normally held in a low position; for some, a tucked tail is normal. Other breeds, such as Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers, normally hold their thickly furred, low-set tails parallel to the ground. Becoming familiar with your dog's normal tail set will help you to recognize when it is held higher or lower than usual, which will tip you off to any change in your dog's emotions.

Cropping the ears and docking the tail inhibit a dog's ability to communicate clearly with other dogs. These cosmetic procedures are unnecessary, painful, and can result in surgical complications. Without a sound medical reason to do so, they should be avoided.

In addition to position, the movement of a dog's tail provides clues about how the dog is feeling. There is a common misconception that a wagging tail is always attached to a happy dog. A Golden Retriever's tail, when he is happy (which seems to be 99.8% of the time), is held parallel to the ground and wags loosely in a wide, swooping arc. But if that same dog were anxious or fearful, the tail would be held lower, wag faster, and make a smaller arc.

A dog will sometimes hold his tail higher than usual and wag it stiffly, like a flag, in a tight arc. The rest of the body will be tense and motionless. Many confident dogs display this type of highly alert body language when meeting other dogs. It can also indicate a certain playful cockiness. At my house, the "cocky tail" is usually attached to Mojo, my beloved twelve-year-old German Shepherd/Rottweiler/Malamute mix. Mojo's cocky tail is obvious whenever he is being playfully antagonistic toward Soko—for example, when he plants himself between her and her favorite resting spot. Body still, tail high and wagging stiffly, you can almost hear his inner Clint Eastwood: *Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?*

Eyes: The eyes of a relaxed, confident dog will be opened wide, but not overly so. The eyes of a dog who is nervous or anxious will appear smaller and elongated. Eyebrows may be raised in an expression of concern (much as in humans), and wrinkling may appear on the forehead. The pupils of a very frightened dog will be dilated. In cases of extreme fear, the eyes may be opened very wide with a lot of the whites showing. This is sometimes referred to as "whale eye."



Note the dilated pupils with whites showing, the tightly closed mouth, and ear laid back.

Mouth: When relaxed, many dogs hold their mouths partially open in a way that resembles a grin. However, the mouth will close momentarily when the dog is frightened or trying to determine whether there is a real threat. Some dogs also puff out the flews—the fleshy areas above the upper lips—on one or both sides. Once the dog has determined that there is nothing to worry about, the facial muscles will relax and that wonderful grin will return.

A fearful display may include a retraction of the corners of the mouth. The mouth will be partially or completely closed, with no teeth showing. This does not resemble your dog’s normal, relaxed grin.



*Above: Mouth closed, lips retracted.
Ears laid back, eyes elongated.*



*Right: Eyes look “worried.”
Mouth closed, puffy flews.*

Piloerection: Piloerection—raised hackles, hair standing on end—is frequently misinterpreted as a sure indication of aggression. While it is true that piloerection often accompanies an aggressive display, it can also manifest as the result of excitement or fear.

When dogs are frightened, they may raise their hackles to make themselves look bigger and more intimidating. As noted ethologist and author Dr. Roger Abrantes says, “The fearful, submissive and surprised dog probably raises its hackles to frighten its opponent. If it succeeds in making its opponent hesitate for a moment it will have a better chance to prepare its defense, or flee.”¹



A lovely example of piloerection and "cocky tail," courtesy of my boy Mojo.

(That's Soko in the foreground, trying to stay out of it!)

Weight distribution: A more subtle aspect of canine body language involves the distribution of body weight. The weight of a dog who is feeling relaxed will be distributed evenly over the front and back legs. A dog who is displaying dominance or aggression will often appear to be leaning forward, the weight apportioned more heavily over the front legs. A fearful dog's weight, however, will be distributed more heavily over the back legs, as though the entire body is leaning backward. Backward leaning may be accompanied by a lowering of the body, as though the dog is cringing or trying to appear smaller. A dog who is extremely frightened might flatten himself completely against the ground. A dog who stretches his muzzle forward to investigate something he is unsure about might not have his weight distributed over his back end, but his back legs are likely to be splayed, giving the impression of a dog who is nervous and ready to flee at any moment.

Weight distributed more heavily over back legs; tail low, wagging in small, tight arc. Ears laid back, eyes elongated, mouth tightly closed.



Weight back, body lowered, ears back, eyes showing whites, tail tucked, front paw slightly raised.





Compare the weight distribution of these two dogs, along with tail position and proximity of the body to the ground.

Fight or Flight Response

The involuntary, instinctual reaction to fight or flee in the face of perceived danger is known as the “fight or flight” response. When this life-preserving response is triggered via the sympathetic nervous system, physiological changes occur in an instant. Sequences of nerve cells fire and adrenaline and other stress hormones are released into the bloodstream. Heartbeat and respiration increase and digestion slows so blood can be shunted away from the stomach to the limbs. These internal changes are designed to protect the dog from harm by preparing the body to fight or to run.

When a serious threat appears at close range but there is room to flee, a dog will normally choose flight. If restrained at the time (for example, by a leash), a dog who desires to flee might instead cower, attempt to hide, or strain to get as far away from the threat as possible. When no form of flight is available, a serious, close-range threat is likely to result in a fight. Any dog, no matter how mild-mannered, may bite if left with no other choice but to defend himself.

Note: Once your dog’s system has been flooded with stress hormones, be alert! Stress hormones do not leave the system immediately, so if something else should frighten your dog after the first incident, chances of a strong reaction are increased.

The way a dog reacts to a fear-inducing situation may be breed-related. For example, a 1958 study showed that when frightened, Beagles freeze, while terriers run around frantically.²

There are two other responses dogs may display when confronted with danger. The first is simply to freeze in place. Freezing may happen when the fear is at a low level or the threat is at a distance; it gives the dog a moment to assess the situation and consider his options. The second is known as “fidget/fool around.” A dog may search around on the ground or perform other canine equivalents of human fidgeting, or bounce or wiggle about, acting in a way we would term silly. While these behaviors might appear pointless, they have a definite purpose—to diffuse a threatening situation. Dogs may go into fidget/fool around mode when trying to get another dog or person to stop acting in a threatening manner.

Fear or Aggression?

The next time your dog encounters an unfamiliar dog or person, note the distribution of his body weight, as well as other body language. Are his ears pinned back, tail lowered, body leaning backward, with weight distributed more heavily over the back legs? Is he barking or growling, but backing away at the same time? If either of those descriptions fits your dog, his motivation is most likely fear. The growling and barking in this case is meant to increase the distance between your dog and whatever is scaring him.

The stance of a dog who truly intends to harm another will appear “forward” as opposed to a back-leaning, fear-reactive stance. In a classic confident display of aggression, a dog’s ears are forward, the tail is held high, and body weight is distributed heavily over the front legs. The lips may be retracted vertically in an *agonistic pucker*—this fright-inducing bit of canine body language can be seen on television programs where wolves respond to a threat by baring their teeth. The agonistic pucker differs from the fearful, closed-mouth, corners-retracted display. In the latter, the teeth are not seen; in the former, the lips are retracted vertically to show the front teeth. An agonistic pucker may be accompanied by a deep snarl. While barking may be a function of either aggression or fear, snarling is always a sign of aggression.

Some dogs, when confronted with an unfamiliar dog or person, are conflicted about how to respond. The dog might lunge in and then dart away, vocalizing in a threatening manner but not really wanting to