



# The Woof-Meow Show

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The “Woof-Meow” show is on every Sunday at 8:30PM on WVOM, 103.9FM, the Voice of Maine. Hosted by Don Hanson of Green Acres Kennel Shop, the show focuses on educating dog and cat guardians about their dogs and cats.

**AIR DATE: 12MAR06 and 19MAR06**

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## **CANINE CALMING SIGNALS AND STRESS**

### **WHAT ARE CALMING SIGNALS?**

We learned of calming signals thanks to much work by Turid Rugaas, a Norwegian canine ethologist. She noticed that dogs, like wolves, had signs to communicate stress and cut off aggression however the dogs’ signals were much more subtle in nature.

Calming signals are a set of body language skills which dogs use to maintain healthy relationships and resolve conflict without having to resort to aggressive behaviors. These signals often occur early in interactions, as soon as a dog becomes aware that a situation may need “calming down.” This facet of canine communication is designed to help dogs calm themselves and others in the face of stress. Additionally, many dogs make use of calming signals in an effort to simply show goodwill. Dogs with the inability to signal and/or respond appropriately to signals often find themselves in predicaments. Essentially, calming signals are meant for the dog to display their stress in the hopes that the individual it is communicating with will understand and alter their behavior.

All breeds of dogs have calming signals; however some are more developed than others due to the differences in their physical attributes. Sometimes these signals may be very subtle in nature and at other times much more overt, often depending upon the level of threat that a dog is feeling. Many calming signals appear to be hardwired into dogs. For example, puppies may exhibit yawning as early as their first day when they are being picked up and handled. Dogs never completely lose their language, but if they do not have the opportunity to practice their signals, or if they are inadvertently punished for using them, calming signals may become suppressed, which unfortunately turns into a vicious circle.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC SIGNALS?

When assessing if a dog is exhibiting calming signals or not, it is important to always look at the context of the situation surrounding the behavior.

- U Head turning/Averting gaze
- U Blinking/Softening gaze
- U Turning away
- U Play bow
- U Curving
- U Slow movements
- U Yawning
- U Sniffing
- U Splitting
- U Nose licking
- U Sitting/Laying down
- U Tail wagging
- U Marking
- U Freezing

## EXAMPLES OF CALMING SIGNALS

### **Averting the Eyes**



Breaking eye contact, by averting the eyes is often the first sign of stress observed in a dog.

### **Turning of the Head**

If your dog becomes nervous about the approach of another dog or person, he may turn his head from side-to-side, or may just turn away. This signals the other dog that they are approaching too quickly or too directly.



## Turning Away



This is an extension of turning your head. If a group of dogs are playing and some of them get too rough, other dogs may turn their side or back to them in order to get the dogs settled down. If your dog is jumping or whining at you, turning away from them may help calm them.

## Nose Licking

Rapid flicking of the tongue over the nose is also a common calming signal. It is often seen with dogs at the veterinarians or when the dog is at the groomers.



## Sniffing

Sniffing as a calming signal must be reviewed within the context in which it appears. Obviously, dogs sniff for other reasons than to just indicate stress.

## Yawning



Dogs may yawn when in stressful situations such as at the vet's office or during a quarrel among its family. If your dog is feeling stressed, standing still and yawning may help them relax. They need to see you yawn though, so even though it is impolite, you do not want to cover your mouth if this is to work.

## Play Position

Dogs will use a “play bow” (front legs and chest on the ground with hind quarters in the air) to initiate play or to calm another animal down that they are unsure about. You can do a play bow to initiate play or to help relax a dog. You can learn much about your dog by just sitting back and watching them interact with you, other family members, other dogs and other animals. If you spend the time to do this, it will greatly increase your ability to communicate with your dog



## WHEN DO DOGS USE CALMING SIGNALS?

When two dogs meet for the first time, it is very common to observe calming signals being demonstrated. In an effort to show politeness and good will, curving, or not approaching head on, is the typical way that two unfamiliar dogs will greet one another. If one dog is approaching too fast or straight on, and the second dog is concerned about this, you may witness the second dog sniff the ground, turn its head or even its entire body in an effort to slow down the approaching dog.

We also may witness calming signals during play. When play gets too rough, often one dog will stop and sit, signaling to the others that it is feeling some stress. Additionally, this is a time when splitting frequently occurs if one dog feels that two of the others are getting a bit too confrontational in their play style. Incidentally, this is what often takes place in a household when two people hug and the dog tries to move in between them. The dog is not feeling jealous; rather it is concerned that a confrontation may ensue.

Dogs use calming signals not just in inter-dog communication but also when communicating with other species. For example, when a guardian raises their voice to their dog, or even makes extensive hand gestures, the dog will frequently look away. For many dogs subtle movements such as leaning forward may be enough to elicit calming behavior on the part of the dog. There are numerous physical acts that we as humans do which our dogs find distasteful, such as hugging. In almost all instances that we have seen a human hug their dog, the dog looks

miserable and is performing a head turn in an effort to display that they are uncomfortable with the situation. Moreover, we commonly see a dog nose licking or yawning at the veterinarian's office where they typically experience high levels of anxiety and/or restraint.

## **INCORPORATING CALMING SIGNALS INTO THE WORKPLACE**

Here at Green Acres Kennel Shop, when working with dogs we watch for calming signals and at the first sign of them we attempt to modify our behavior. For example, when approaching a dog we do so in a curved fashion if at all possible. This allows for our initial greeting to be polite in nature. Also, when training, if we have a dog exhibiting calming signals, we may end the session if we cannot determine and make the appropriate adjustments to ameliorate whatever is distressing to the dog. Splitting is commonly used during classes and playtimes if we feel that dogs are getting too rowdy or we are concerned about a potential conflict. In order to show good will, one of the signals we use most frequently and one of the easiest to use is a head turn followed by turning sideways to the dog if need be. Some signals of course are easier for humans to imitate than others, such as averting eyes, turning, yawning and splitting.

## **YOUR BODY LANGUAGE**

The most important thing that you can do when working with your dog is to simply watch the dog. Humans have a very different communication system from dogs and many things that we do our canine companions find offensive and distressful. When our pets show us calming signals, we need to observe these and cease what we are doing. All dogs are individuals and some will be more sensitive than others to particular situations. Some of the more predictable human behaviors that elicit calming signals are raising our voices (I hope that one is obvious), leaning over the dog, staring, patting the dog on the head, and physically manipulating the dogs body position. While dogs can be taught to tolerate some of these items, and even occasionally come to like them (not yelling), this does not come naturally for the dog.

## **STRESS AND DOGS**

Stress has the same effect upon the body whether it is “good” stress or “bad” stress, and that effect can be disastrous over the long haul. Stress occurs in any situation when a dog is feeling threatened or as though it cannot cope with the present circumstances that it is finding itself in. Essentially, what transpires when a dog gets stressed is that first its adrenaline levels increase. This increases strength and ability to move quickly should need be. The adrenaline is a short term stress hormone that in turn activates cortisol, a longer term stress hormone. When adrenaline increases it affects ADH (antidiuretic hormone) which controls water balance. This is why we see sweaty pads and increased urination in times of stress. The gastric juices, sex hormones and defense mechanisms also rise, leading to increased irritability. It takes anywhere from two to six days for cortisol levels to return to normal. This is why it is so critical that animals not be stressed on a daily basis and that they learn to cope in a positive manner so they are not continually producing cortisol as the stress can accumulate slowly. This is where the proverbial “straw that broke the camel's back” comes into play.

## **SIGNS OF STRESS IN A DOG**

The following are some of the signs that a dog may exhibit when they are experiencing stress:

- U Panting
- U Vocalizing
- U Shedding/Dandruff
- U Scratching/Licking/Biting self

- U Shaking
- U Sweaty paws/Increased urination
- U Diarrhea/Urinating or defecating inappropriately (providing house trained)
- U Circling/Restless/Pacing
- U Chewing items
- U Allergies
- U Displacement behaviors/Increased reactivity
- U Shuts down

It is important to remember that all calming signals are displayed at low levels of stress. As the stress level increases, calming signals will cease to be displayed.

### **COMMON STRESSORS FOR DOGS**

The following is a list of just some of the items that can lead to stress in a dog:

- U Not having basic needs met (food, water, elimination needs)
- U Punitive training/aggression
- U Too much exercise or too little exercise
- U Pain
- U Being left alone or being in an overly crowded area
- U Sudden changes
- U Frightening situations

Remember, all dogs are individuals and as such different things will stress different dogs.

Dogs that live with high levels of stress are much more likely to have health problems, such as gastrointestinal difficulties, and be quicker to react in difficult situations.

### **OTHER RESOURCES:**

Rugaas, Turid. On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals. Dogwise Publishing, Washington. 2006.

Rugaas, Turid. Calming Signals: What Your Dog Tells You. Dogwise Publishing. (DVD run time 48 minutes).

Calming Signals Community - <http://www.canis.no/rugaas/index.php>