

Signs of Agitation

Many dog owners can tell when their own or another dog is very upset. There will be big signals. If the dog is angry, you might hear growling or see bared teeth. If the dog is afraid, you might see a tucked tail or shaking.

It is also important to learn to see the initial, smaller signs that a dog is upset. This can help you to prevent further escalation. It can tell you when you should break up play which has become uncomfortable to one or both of the dogs. It can also help you to introduce yourself or your dog to another dog.

Ear position, for example, can tell you a lot. Pinned back ears are a sign of stress. Eyes can tell you a lot as well. Looking away from the object of fear is a common way of showing anxiety. Fear can easily turn to aggression, so it is important to be aware of it.

Tail wagging and hair raising (those doggie mohawks), on the other hand, don't tell you as much as you might think. Dogs wag their tail when they're happy, excited, and angry. Hair raising definitely indicates excitement, but it doesn't necessarily mean the dog is angry or going to become aggressive.

Many of the signs that a dog is upset can also mean other things. It is important to look at the totality of the dog's body language rather than at only that one signal. For example, a dog licking its lips might just be licking its lips, or it might be anxious. A dog blinking rapidly might have some eye irritation or might be nervous. A dog yawning might be tired, or agitated. A dog scratching might have an itch, or might be upset. If you see several of these behaviors one after the other, it is more likely that you are seeing a stressed out dog.

It's been found that people and other dogs can actually calm a stressed dog down by replicating some of these signals. For that reason, they are called "calming signals." If you lick your lips, yawn, blink and then look away from a dog, you are helping it to calm down and feel better about you and the situation in general.

Never approach a dog who is exhibiting signs of agitation. You and your dog can simply remove yourselves from the situation. If that's not possible, you can get down low, look away from the dog, and exhibit some calming signals. If the dog wants to approach you, it will.