

Dog Body Language Deep Dive: Head & Shoulders Over and Humping

I am a fortunate person. I live with a group of dogs of various ages and breeds. One of my favourite things is to observe them as they interact with each other, gaining invaluable insight into the canine world of communication through their play, body language, behaviours and sounds. It also enables me to better understand the nuances and richness of canine social dynamics.

Alas, this is not the case for many people. They have not had the opportunity to study dogs' natural communication and instead rely on information publicized by well-intentioned individuals and targeted at understanding our canine family members. The result is an oversimplification of another specie's communication system and can lead to conflict, frustration and misunderstandings between dogs and their human companions.

As a dog behaviour consultant and trainer, I have been asked to explain specific behaviours dogs sometimes exhibit and which may seem strange, unusual and sometimes intimidating or aggressive.

"Why is that dog putting his head over the shoulders of that other dog! Should I be worried?"

"My dog humps me when I come home. Are they trying to dominate me?"

"OMG! Your dog is standing over me. Is he going to attack me?" (This was from my sister who was visiting and my Malinois stood over her).

These are valid questions. We see, read, and hear so much conflicting information about specific action patterns dogs display, and it can leave us scratching our heads with uncertainty and confusion. I am going to focus on the three behaviours identified in the questions asked - dogs who put their heads over the shoulder of another dog, dogs that stand over another dog (or person) and humping behaviour.

To help dispel myths and gain accurate knowledge, I went on a fact-seeking mission and asked many prominent individuals who help teach us about dogs. I have to say, they were ALL wonderful and gracious when sharing their knowledge and opinions. I list who they were at end of this article. Once I had collected all their opinions, the noticeably clear message was that each of the three behaviours we are discussing has different meanings, depending on the body language and context in which the dogs displayed these behaviours. Let's look at each behaviour and identify some of the specific inferences we can draw based on OTHER factors that accompany them.

Head Over the Shoulder

One dog placing its head over another dog's shoulder is a strong form of body language. It is usually viewed as domineering, controlling and pushy, or often a precursor to confrontation or aggression. In fact, it can convey different meanings, depending on the relationship of the two dogs and the context in which the behaviour occurs.

- 1. Dominance and control:** By placing the head over the shoulder of another dog, the dominant dog asserts control over the dog under them. It is often accompanied by stiff body posture and hard eyes. The dog on the bottom may have their head lowered, ears pinned and the whites of their eyes showing, with a tight, closed mouth.
- 2. Conflict and Aggression:** In some situations, a dog placing their head over the shoulder is a precursor to aggression. If the "under" dog feels threatened or challenged by the "over" dog, they may respond with growling, snarling, snapping etc.
- 3. Playfulness:** During playful interactions, some dogs may place their head over the shoulder of another dog as part of the game. Signalling body language would include loose tail wags, play bows, relaxed bodies and jaws.
- 4. Affection and Bonding:** When the head over the shoulder behaviour happens between two dogs that have a bond and are very familiar with each other, this behaviour can be viewed as demonstrating trust and affection.

Dog Standing Over Another Dog

When a dog stands over another dog, their body language is often assertive and strong. Many view this as another form of dominance or control and, although it can be those things, it often has other meanings:

- 1. Protective Behaviour:** For some dogs, standing over another dog is a protective and nurturing behaviour. This can occur with two dogs that have a close bond such as a familial relationship or long-time group members. For example, my Malinois would stand over the matriarchal dog in our home when she was lying down. His body was erect. His head pointing and looking straight ahead with soft eyes. His one paw would lift slightly as he stepped over her. There was no other conclusion to draw than he was protecting her as she slept. It was beautiful.

2. **Playful Interaction:** During play, one dog might stand over another dog as a method to initiate the beginning or continuation of play. This behaviour is often accompanied by loose wagging tails, soft and opened mouths, play bows, etc.
3. **Dominance:** When accompanied by stiff and still body language, closed mouths, erect ears, a dog standing over another dog can be viewed as a powerful position to assert dominance.

Humping and Mounting

First and foremost, the one thing to remember about humping and mounting behaviour in dogs is that it is a natural and normal behaviour. Although humans find it annoying and embarrassing, it is quite common dog body language used to communicate emotional states, desires and intentions from playfulness, arousal to dominance.

1. **Sexual Behaviour:** This is the most obvious reason for mounting and humping. Mating behaviour to procreate is a natural occurrence between male and female dogs.
2. **Arousal:** Dogs may display mounting or humping behaviour when excited or aroused. Dr. Simon Gadbois shared a story about his Golden Retriever that humps him or anyone she likes when she first sees them. Puppies and other dogs will often hump or mount during play, ensuring physical contact occurs.
3. **Stress and Anxiety:** For some dogs, humping and mounting behaviours are displacement behaviours when they have an internal conflict between arousal and stress or fearfulness.
4. **Dominance and Social hierarchy:** It is true that humping can be used to assert dominance over another dog, although this behaviour is more common in other canids than in dogs.

So, are these behaviours problematic? Do we need to suppress these natural messages that are part of a nuanced and intricate canine-specific communication system? The key message here is context matters!! I can not stress that enough. What we can do is become excellent observers of our dogs and their body language cues so we can supervise them and determine when our dogs have a conflict and when they do not. Simply stopping a dog from "humping" or "standing over" another dog without looking at the context of the situation and understanding the relationship between the two dogs can lead to having other behaviours emerge because of the suppression or interruption of this natural behaviour and communication dynamic. Yes, we must be careful and be prepared to intervene if two dogs meet, and it is clear by the stiff body language that one or the other is not accepting of any of these three behaviours. But I would never

have stopped my Malinois from standing over a dog or person he cares about - especially me.

Finally, inspired by Dr. Marc Bekoff, there simply is no one-size-fits-all answer to dog behaviour, and a deep dive into the context in which the behaviours occur has a direct impact on the interpretation of that behaviour. Each dog is different and the situations that they find themselves in influence what their behaviours mean. These behaviours can have multiple meanings, and the truth is we do not REALLY know what it means. Dr. Bekoff explains it is important not to rush into generalizations or misleading explanations but to spend more time observing and getting to know your own dog and their individual idiosyncrasies. In this way, we can form better mutual relationships and work with kindness and compassion with the dog we have in front of us.

I would like to thank the experts who have contributed to my education on this topic. Their remarkable work has helped us all do better with our dogs. Our gratitude can never be adequately expressed:

Dr. Simon Gadbois is an expert in Neuroscience, Animal Behaviour and Psychology. He is a Professor in the Department of Psychology & Neurosciences at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Kim Brophy is an Applied Ethologist, author of the book "Meet Your Dog" and the creator of the L.E.G.S. Family Dog Mediator course.

Sue Sternberg is a canine behaviour & shelter dog specialist as well as an author of many dog books.

Dr. Marc Bekoff is an ethologist, evolutionary biologist and behaviour ecologist and a professor at the University of Colorado. He is a prolific author of on the behaviour of dogs and writes on animal emotion in Psychology Today.



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