

## **How Well Do You Speak "Dog"?**

Humans are fortunate to have a communication system that allows us to clearly state our point in a variety of ways. We can use intonation and inflection in our voice to make one statement mean different things. For example, you can say *"oh really?"* with wide eyes and in a breathy tone to mean you are surprised. Take those same two words *"oh really?"* and say it with a raised eyebrow and a flat tone to mean you are not impressed.

A dog's particular body language can also have a dual meaning. But instead of listening to intonation or inflection, we must look at the context and other body language signals to understand the true meaning. Here are some common examples.

### **When Dogs Show their Belly - What we often think it means: I want pets!**

#### ***When this is true:***

Many dogs do show their belly to elicit attention and physical touch. This is true when, In addition to showing their belly, a dog will be wiggly, have an open mouth, look at you with squinty eyes and may make soft "huffy" sounds. This is when they want pets, so go ahead!

#### ***When it means something else:***

Especially the first time a dog meets a person or another dog, showing their belly could mean "I'm a little uncomfortable and I need space". When their body is still, their mouth is closed, and they are looking away from you, or repeatedly licking their nose or lips, this may also signal a need for space. In that case, give them some space and allow them to approach on their own terms.

### **Wagging Tail – What we often think it means: I'm happy!**

#### ***When this is true:***

If the tail is moving side to side or even in a spinning motion in addition to a wiggly body, an open mouth, squinty eyes and/or curving their bodies, this means they are happy.

#### ***When it means something else:***

If the dog's tail is wagging upright and stiffly like a flag, the rest of the dog's body is stiff and they are staring directly at the person or dog approaching, I would give this dog some space. They could be over excited or unsure about this approach and it could turn into a snarl and a lunge to ask for space.

### **When a dog jumps and bites at the leash – We often think the dog wants to play.**

#### ***When this is true:***

If you have just leashed up your dog after a play session, then they probably want to continue. Also, if the dog's body language is wiggly and they let go when asked and then come back again, perhaps with a play bow, they are looking to play.

#### ***When it means something else:***

If your dog starts to jump and bite at the leash out of nowhere on a walk, his body is stiff and he is unable to respond to you, your dog may be anxious or frustrated. I often see this happening when a dog

is overwhelmed and needs a moment to process what is going on around them. This is very common for rescues that may have seen or heard “triggers”, or things that they don’t understand or may perceive as threats - such as loud trucks, other dogs, strollers, etc. In this case, they need time to calm down before moving forward. Scattering treats works well to help them calm down and then waiting a few minutes while they shake it off (like they are wet) before moving on. If the behaviour continues, it’s time to go home.

### **When your dog humps – we often think they are being controlling.**

#### ***When it’s true:***

Dogs will mount for various reasons - sexual, to control a dog or to provoke a reaction. This tends to happen when they are young and learning “social graces”, but it can become a habit. Again, the body language is key. Direct eye contact, stiff bodies, unrelentless attention to a particular dog or person, lip curling and growling are signs that you want to watch out for and avoid this type of humping.

#### ***When it means something else:***

Dogs will hump other dogs, people and/or things like pillows and stuffed animals to help relieve stress because they don’t know what to do in the situation or because they are over-excited. Dogs who exhibit this behavior are normally very excited before it happens, tend to pant a lot, aren’t looking directly at the person/dog/item they are humping and have a hard time calming down when removed. Take note of these situations and work with a trainer to help your dog to calm down during these situations or to manage them.

### **When your dog yawns – we often think they are tired.**

#### ***When it’s true:***

If your dog is settling in for a snooze or just got up from a snooze, then it is probably a regular yawn. The yawn looks very relaxed, and a stretch may follow.

#### ***When it means something else:***

Dogs also yawn because they are a little stressed or frustrated. This type of yawn happens when they are not tired, usually looks quite forced and not relaxed and the dog will look away from you. Take note of when your dog yawns when you are out on a walk, in your home, when you have guests over, etc. You will find that there is a pattern, and you will learn what things might stress or frustrate your dog. It could be people getting too close to them, when you go in a direction they don't want to go or when an excitable dog is near by. They may need a bit of space or just want to get going.

Observing your dog and learning these subtle signs of communication will give you a deeper understanding of your dog’s state of mind, as well as when and how they are trying to communicate with you. These are just a few examples, there are many, many more - so if you would like to learn more, here are a few good resources:

App: The Dog Decoder

Book: On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas

Website: [www.educanine.org](http://www.educanine.org) for courses and a webinar



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In addition to the certifications above, Andrea is certified through the Karen Pryor Foundations and Kids Around Dogs, and she has also taken the Masters Course in Dog Aggression through AggressiveDog.com. She is the founder of EduCanine and City Dogs Training & Behavior and also created "The Rescue Plan."