

Dog Body Language & Calming Signals

Dogs speak quietly first. Learn these signals and you will catch stress minutes before it becomes barking, lunging, or a bite.

Calming signals are your dog's polite way of saying "I'm uncomfortable" or "let's keep this peaceful." Reward them by easing the pressure — never correct a dog for communicating.

You see this	It usually means	What to do
Play bow (front down, tail up)	"Everything after this is play!"	Join in or let the game continue — this is the good stuff.
Lip licking (no food around)	Mild stress or uncertainty.	Soften your voice, turn slightly sideways, give space.
Yawning when not tired	Self-soothing under pressure.	Ask: what just changed? Reduce the pressure if you can.
Whale eye (whites of eyes showing)	Worried and feeling cornered — a serious "please stop."	Stop, step back, let the dog move away. Teach kids this one first.
Shake-off (full body, like after a bath)	Resetting after a stressful moment — tension leaving.	Good sign. Praise calmly and carry on.
Sniffing the ground mid-greeting	"I mean no trouble" — a peacemaking signal.	Let them sniff. Do not drag them into the greeting.
Loose, wide, sweeping tail wag	Relaxed and friendly — whole body wiggles too.	Say hello! Match their easy energy.
Stiff, high, fast tail wag + frozen body	Aroused and NOT necessarily friendly.	Create distance calmly. This is not the moment to pet.
Rolling over with a tense body	Often "please stop" — not always a belly-rub request.	Stop touching. If the dog wriggles toward you loosely, carry on.
Paw lift while staring at something	Uncertainty or intense focus.	Redirect with a cheerful cue and reward the disengage.

You see this	It usually means	What to do
Panting with ears pinned back	Stress or overheating — read the setting.	Shade, water, rest. If unexplained at rest, call the vet.
Turning head/body away	Polite de-escalation — "I need a break."	Honor it every time and your dog will keep asking politely.

Calm-down toolkit (2 minutes)

- ✓ **Scatter sniff:** toss a handful of treats in grass and let your dog hunt. Sniffing measurably lowers arousal.
- ✓ **Side-on + slow:** turn your body sideways, slow your movements, breathe out audibly. Dogs read your body before your words.
- ✓ **The exit is the reward:** when your dog looks away from a trigger and back to you, mark it ("yes!") and create distance. Distance is the paycheck.
- ✓ **Kids rule:** no hugging dogs around the neck, no disturbing a sleeping or eating dog — most family bites are preventable with these two.