

Canine communication and safety



Through learning how dogs convey their emotional state we can interpret whether our dogs are calm, alert, happy or experiencing fear, anxiety and stress that can lead to aggression. We are able to understand how our dog is likely to be feeling, how they may react and what behaviours they are likely to exhibit.

Dogs have evolved to communicate to other dogs. They do not perceive humans as other dogs but when under stress or anxiety they will show certain behaviours that allows us to bridge the gap in communication.

Not all dogs are the same, for example, through selective breeding we have altered the way some breeds look and thus how they can communicate, it is important for you to get to know your dog and identify how they communicate. This is something that, with practice, can become second nature and allows us to have safe, well adjusted family dogs.

So how do we know if our dog is fearful, anxious or stressed?
Dogs use both visual and verbal signals to convey their emotional state.

Basic visual and verbal signals

There are many varieties of verbal language, which are influenced by the breed, sex and individual dog. The benefit of using verbal signals to express emotions is it leaves their body available to do other things. Vocal sounds in puppies are very important as they help mothers to know which pup is which and whether they are happy, hungry or in pain.

Ears: movement and different positions e.g. flat, upright.

Lips: use them to show different amounts of teeth and gums.

Eyes: different size of lid opening, looking in different angles, staring and looking away.

Neck and back: movement, position and hair erection (hackles).

Tail: hair level, movement, position e.g. Between legs, over back.

Body: position e.g. stand, squat, rollover.

Barking	showing possible signs of stress, frustration, surprise, boredom, it could also act as a warning, or an engagement in play.
Add a Whine	a different meaning: your dog may be in distress, with stress levels rising too much for your dog to cope in a particular situation.
Yapping	used to get attention and in play.
Howling	the canine contact call – it means, “Here I am!”
Snarling/growling	can mean two things and you recognise which it is being used for by watching the body signals as well. It can mean a threat, warning, or the opposite as used in play.
Yelping	a withdrawal sound, caused by pain, fear and/or the related surprise.
Whimpering	can be another indication of stress, or in need of toileting or other attention.



The 4 'F's fear responses



The 4 'F's are a summary of an animal's response to a threatening situation (see next page for more detailed info). If we miss our dog's early reactions to the scary situation, you risk them moving on to other fear responses. These methods in communication are designed to attempt to avoid escalation towards aggression.

Aggression is a dog's last resort and is the result of fear and anxiety. It is important to never punish your dog as this will damage the trust and relationship between you, and can increase aggression. If you punish a dog for growling, you remove your early warning system that something is wrong and next time they could jump straight to a bite. If at any point your dog growls, then you must take heed of the warning and contact the Family Dog team for advice.

Where possible all family members should be educated on the 4 'F's and how to appropriately interact with your dog- we discuss ideas on how to do this during the workshops. When the team leader is aware of how dogs communicate, they can properly supervise interaction between children and dogs, and intervene where necessary. By understanding these behaviours we are able to take steps to minimise stress and prevent problems in the future.

Signs of/the problem with stress

There are two types of stress, short term and long term. Short term stress is a normal, indeed crucial behaviour for survival. Long term stress is abnormal, whether through regular short term stress (i.e. regular vet visits) or living in a restrictive environment (i.e. your dog being unable to fulfil their instinctual drives for days, weeks, years) or indeed living with fear in the home.

Long term stress affects the health and welfare of your dog. The immune system is less able to function, your dog's reactions may be more severe than usual (for example resort to 'fight' more quickly). Your dog may give up normal behaviours such as eating properly or sleeping. He or she may also adopt abnormal behaviours when under such stress, for example pica (eating non-nutritious substances) or over grooming, being destructive or barking, and so on.

Uncharacteristic behaviour	Health
Withdrawn and subdued	Weight loss
Avoidance and unable to walk ahead	Increase in thirst
'Fiddle' behaviour e.g. Scratching, sniffing, licking etc. (PTO)	Loss of appetite
Increased vocalisation	Skin problems e.g. Eczema
Over grooming or self mutilation	Increase in appetite without weight gain
Changes in toileting habits e.g. Routine, toileting indoors	Digestive problems e.g. Diarrhoea
Over dependence on handler	Dandruff/Sudden moulting
Excessive excitement/hyperactivity	
Destructive behaviour	
Aggression	

Causes of stress

These will vary greatly, depending on the individual dog and the environments to which each dog is exposed. Hopefully, you will be able to identify what it is that is causing your dog stress, but below are some examples:

- Environmental
 - exposure to new environment
 - particular environment that is unpleasant for your dog e.g. Too noisy, too busy
- Changes
 - handler e.g. New owner
 - environment and/or routine e.g. Moving house
- Handler
 - asking for too much too soon, inhibiting natural behaviours
 - over physical or inconsistent handling
- Health and welfare
 - physical needs not being met e.g. Inadequate exercise, unbalanced diet, poor sleep
 - psychological needs not being met e.g. Companionship, canine interaction, play
 - pain and discomfort

Minimising stress

If you notice that your dog is showing signs of stress (i.e. displaying any of the 4 'F's') it is important to identify what it is that is causing this, and then take action to minimise it.

In order to work out what it is that is stressful for your dog, you may need to try to view the situation objectively and from your dog's perspective. Setting up appropriate environments and understanding normal behaviour is key here.

- Immediate actions:
 - o Stop the activity that you are doing with your dog
 - o Remove your dog from the stressful place or situation
 - o Give your dog some space to take 'flight' or reassure your dog as appropriate
 - o Have a confident, calm, positive approach
 - o Review your handling style
- Long term strategies:
 - o Seek veterinary advice, to check for physical causes or for a referral to a qualified behaviour specialist
 - o Avoid particular environments or activities that cause your dog stress
 - o Reduce your dog's workload, setting up an area where he or she can be away from the rest of the household with food, water, chews, toys, and appropriate bedding
 - o Ensure you are providing your dog with all of the opportunities to meet and display their natural physical needs e.g. Chewing, adequate exercise, balanced diet
 - o Review your dog's needs
 - o Familiarise your dog to new environments and activities gradually, refer to your gradual introductions tick sheet.

The 4 'F's in details

