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Calming Signals - The Art of Survival

By Turid Rugaas

For species who live in packs it's important to be able to communicate with its own kind. Both in order to cooperate when they hunt, to bring up their offspring, and perhaps most importantly: to live in peace with each other. Conflicts are dangerous - they cause physical injuries and a weakened pack, which is something that no pack can afford - it will cause them to go extinct.

Dogs live in a world of sensory input: visual, olfactory, auditory perceptions. They easily perceive tiny details - a quick signal, a slight change in another's behavior, the expression in our eyes. Pack animals are so perceptive to signals that a horse can be trained to follow the contraction in our pupils and a dog can be trained to answer your whispering voice. There's no need to shout commands, to make the tone of our voice deep and angry - what Karen Pryor refers to as swatting flies with a shovel.

The dogs have about 30 calming signals, perhaps even more. Some of these signals are used by most dogs, while other dogs have an incredibly rich 'vocabulary'. It varies from dog to dog.

The problem

Dogs use this communication system towards us humans, simply because it's the language they know and think everyone understands.

By failing to see your dog using calming signals on you, and perhaps even punish the dog for using them, you risk causing serious harm to your dog. Some may simply give up using the calming signals, including with other dogs. Others may get so desperate and frustrated that they get aggressive, nervous or stressed out as a result. Puppies and young dogs may actually go into a state of shock.

Basic knowledge

Dad calls Prince and has learned in class that he needs to sound strict and dominant so that Prince will understand who is in charge. Prince finds dad's voice to be aggressive, and being a dog he instantly give dad a calming signal in order to make him stop being aggressive. Prince will perhaps lick his own nose, yawn, turn away - which will result in dad becoming angry for real, because dad perceives Prince as being pig-headed, stubborn and disobedient. Prince is punished for using his calming signals to calm dad. This is a typical example of something that happens on an everyday basis with many dog owners.

We need to learn to understand the language of dogs so that we can understand what our dogs are telling us. That is the secret of having a good life together.

How the dog is using the calming signals

Yawning

The dog may yawn when someone bends over him, when you sound angry, when there's yelling and quarreling in the family, when the dog is at the vet's office, when someone is walking directly at the dog, when the dog is excited with happiness and anticipation - for instance by the door when you are about to go for a walk, when you ask the dog to do something he doesn't feel like doing, when your training sessions are too long and the dog gets tired, when you have said NO for doing something you disapprove of, and in many other situations.

Threatening signals (to walk straight at, reach for the dog, bending over the dog, staring into the dog's eyes, fast movements, and so on) will always cause the dog to use a calming signal. There are about 30 different calming signals, so even when many dogs will yawn, other dogs may use another calming signal.

All dog knows all the signals. When one dog yawns and turn his head to the side, the dog he is 'talking to' may lick his nose and turn his back - or do something completely different.

The signals are international and universal. All dogs all over the worlds has the same language. A dog from Japan would be understood by an elkhound who lives in an isolated valley in Norway. They will have no communication problems!

Licking

Licking is another signal that is used often. Especially by black dogs, dogs with a lot of hair around their faces, and others who's facial expressions for some reasons are more difficult to see than those of dogs with lighter colors, visible eyes and long noses. But anyone can use licking, and all dogs understand it no matter how quick it is. The quick little lick on the nose is easier to see if you watch the dog from in front. It's best seen if you can find somewhere you can sit in peace and quiet and observe. Once you have learned to see the lick, you will also be able to see it while walking the dog.

Sometimes it's nothing more than a very quick lick, the tip of the tongue is barely visible outside the mouth, and only for a short second. But other dogs see it, understand it and respond to it. Any signal is always returned with a signal.

Turning away/turning of the head

The dog can turn its head slightly to one side, turn the head completely over to the side, or turn completely around so that the back and tail is facing whoever the dog is calming. This is one of the signals you may see most of the time in dogs.

When someone is approaching your dog from in front, he will turn away in one of these ways. When you seem angry, aggressive or threatening, you will also see one of these variations of the signal. When you bend over a dog to stroke him, he will turn his head away from you. When you make your training sessions too long or too difficult, he will turn his head away from you. When the dog is taken by surprise or take someone by surprise, he will turn away quickly. The same happens when someone is staring or acting in a threatening way.

In most cases, this signal will make the other dog calm down. It's a fantastic way in which to solve conflicts, and it's used a lot by all dogs, whether they are puppies or adults, high or low ranking, and so on. Allow your dog to use it! Dogs are experts at solving and avoiding conflicts - they know how to deal with conflicts.

Play bow

Going down with front legs in a bowing position can be an invitation to play if the dog is moving legs from side to side in a playful manner. Just as often, the dog is standing still while bowing and is using the signal to calm someone down. These signals often have double meanings and may be used in many different ways - often the invitation to play is a calming signal by itself because the dog is making a potentially dangerous situation less tense and diverts with something safe.

Recently, in a puppy class with a mix of puppies, one of them was afraid of the others in the beginning. The others left him alone and respected his fear. In the end he would dare to approach the others. When he did, he went into a play bow as soon as one of the other dogs looked at him. It was an obvious combination of slight fear of the others, as well as wanting to take part in the playing.

When two dogs approach each other too abruptly, you will often see that they go into a play bow. This is one of the signals that are easy to see, especially because they remain standing in the bow position for a few seconds so that you have plenty of time to observe it.

Sniffing the ground

Sniffing the ground is a frequently used signal. In groups of puppies you will see it a lot, and also when you and your dog is out walking and someone is coming towards you, in places where there's a lot going on, in noisy places or when seeing objects that the dog isn't sure of what is and find intimidating.

Sniffing the ground may be anything from moving the nose swiftly down toward the ground and back up again - to sticking the nose to the ground and sniff persistently for several minutes.

Is someone approaching you on the pavement? Take a look at your dog. Did he drop the nose down toward the ground, even slightly? Did he turn his side to the one approaching and sniff the side of the road?

Of course, dogs sniff a lot, also in order to 'read the paper' and enjoy themselves. Dogs are pre-programmed to use their noses and it's their favorite activity. However, sometimes it's calming - it depends on the situation. So pay attention to when and in which situations the sniffing occur!

Walking slowly

High speed will be seen as threatening to many dogs, and they might want to go in to try and stop the one who is running. This is partly a hunting behavior and is triggered by the sight of a running human or dog. If the one running is coming straight at the dog, it involves a threat and a defence mechanism sets in.

A dog who is insecure will move slowly. If you wish to make a dog feel safer, then you can move slower. When I see a dog react to me with a calming signal, I immediately respond by moving slower.

Is your dog coming very slowly when you call him? If so, check the tone of your voice - do you sound angry or strict? That may be enough for him to want to calm you down by walking slowly. Have you ever been angry with him when he came to you? Then this may be why he doesn't trust you. Another reason to calm

you may be if the dog is always put on a leash when coming when called. Take a look at your dog the next time you call him. Does he give you any calming signals when coming? If he moves slowly, you may need to do something different in the way you act.

Freezing

"Freezing" - is what we call it when the dog is stopping while standing completely still, sitting or laying down and remain in that position. This behavior is believed to have something to do with hunting behavior - when the prey is running, the dog attacks. Once the prey stops, the dog will stop too. We can often see this when dogs are chasing cats. This behavior, however, is used in several different situations. When you get angry and aggressive and appear threatening, the dog will often freeze and not move in order to make you be good again. Other times the dog may walk slowly, freeze, and then move slowly again. Many owners believe that they have very obedient dogs who is sitting, lying down or standing completely still. Perhaps they are actually using calming signals? Very often a dog will stop and remain calm when someone is approaching. If your dog wants to stop or move slowly in a situation like that, then let him. Also, should your dog be in a conflict situation with a human or dog, and is unable to escape, freezing may be one way to calm the other dog or person.

Sitting down/lifting one paw

I have only rarely seen dogs lift their paw as a calming signal, but on a few occasions it's clearly been used to calm another dog.

To sit down, or an even stronger signal, to sit down with the back turned towards someone - for instance the owner - has a very calming effect. It's often seen when one dog wants to calm another dog who is approaching too quickly. Dogs may sit down with their backs turned against the owner when he or she sounds too strict or angry.

Walking in curve

This signal is frequently used as a calming signal, and it is the main reason why dogs may react so strongly towards meeting dogs when they are forced to walk straight at someone.. Their instincts tell them that it is wrong to approach someone like that - the owner says differently. The dog gets anxious and defensive. And we get a dog who is barking and lunging at other dogs, and eventually we have an aggressive dog.

Dogs, when given a chance, will walk in curves around each other. That's what they do when they meet off leash and are free to do things their own way. Allow your dog to do the same when he's with you.

Some dogs needs large curves, while others only need to walk slightly curved. Allow the dog decide what feels right and safe for him, then, in time and if you want to, he can learn to pass other dogs closer.

Let the dog walk in a curve around a meeting dog! Don't make him walk in a heel position while you're going straight forward - give him a chance to walk in a curve past the meeting dog. If you keep the leash loose and let the dog decide, you will often see that the dog chooses to walk away instead of getting hysterical.

For the same the reason, don't walk directly toward a dog, but walk up to it in a curve. The more anxious or aggressive the dog is, the wider you make the curve.

Other calming signals

By now you have learned about some of the more common calming signals. There are around 30 of them, and many have yet to be described. I will mention a few more briefly so that you can make further observations:

- "Smiling", either by pulling the corners of the mouth up and back, or by showing the teeth as in a grin.
- Smacking the lips
- Wagging the tail - should a dog show signs of anxiety, calming or anything that clearly has little to do with happiness, the wagging of the tail isn't an expression of happiness, but rather that the dog wants to calm you.
- Urinating on himself - A dog who is cowering and crawling toward his owner while wetting himself and waving his tail, is showing three clear signs of calming - and of fear. · Wanting to get up into your face and lick the corners of your mouth.
- Making the face round and smooth with the ears close to the head in order to act like a puppy. (No one will harm a puppy, is what the dog believes)
- Laying down with the belly against the ground. This has nothing to do with submission - submission is when the dog lays down with the belly up. Laying down with the belly towards the ground is a calming signal.
- ...an there are even more calming signals that are used in combination with others. For instance, a dog may urinate at the same time as he is turning his back to something. This is a clear sign of calming by for instance an annoying adolescent dog.

Some dogs act like puppies, jumping around and act silly, throwing sticks around, etc. if they discover a fearful dog nearby. It's supposed to have, and does have, a calming effect.

Meeting situations

A meeting situation between two strange dogs will almost never show signs of strong submission or what people refer to as dominant behavior. A meeting situation between two dogs will usually be something like this:

King and Prince sees each other at 150 meters range and are headed toward each other. They start sending each other message the moment they see each other. Prince stops and stands still ('freezes'), and King is walking slowly while he keeps glancing at the other dog through the corner of his eye.

As King gets closer, Prince starts licking his nose intensely, and he turns his side to King and starts sniffing the ground too. Now King is so close that he needs to be even more calming, so he starts walking in a curve and away from Prince - still slowly and now he is licking his nose too. Prince sits down, and looks away by turning his head far to one side.

By now the two dogs have 'read' each other so well that they know whether they wish to go over and greet each other, or if this could get so intense that it is best to stay away from each other.

Never force dogs into meeting others

Allow the dogs to use their language in meeting situations so that they feel safe. Sometimes they will walk up to each other and get along, other times they feel that it's safer to stay at a distance - after all, they have

already read each other's signals, they do so even at a several hundred meters distance - there's no need to meet face to face.

In Canada, dog trainers who attended my lecture, came up with a new name of these calming signals: "The Language of Peace". That's exactly what it is. It's a language which is there to make sure that dogs have a way to avoid and solve conflicts and live together in a peaceful manner. And the dogs are experts at it.

Start observing and you will see for yourself. Most likely, you will get a much better relationship with your dog and other dogs, too, once you are beginning to realize what the dog is really telling you. It's likely that you will understand things you earlier were unable to figure out. It is incredibly exciting, as well as educational.

Welcome to the world of the dog, and to knowledge of a whole new language!