HANDOUT 01: HOW DO DOGS COMMUNICATE? - OBSERVATION TRAINING

Though we do a lot of speaking to them, our dogs actually rely most on nonverbal communication, or body language. When they communicate with each other, no words are needed because it's all in how they hold themselves.

Contrary to popular belief, our domestic canines are actually far removed from their historic wild ancestors – they are as different as we are from chimpanzees! Over thousands of years, dogs evolved right alongside us as our guardians, farmhands, and hunters, but most of all: as our companions. They learned how to communicate and express themselves to us as a species, and we in turn selectively bred those individuals with desirable, even "human-like" traits (how expressive are your dog's eyebrows?) "Alpha Theory" in our dogs has been widely debunked for decades: they simply aren't wild animals and haven't been for a long time.

That's not to say we can learn nothing from wolves - they are also canids after all, and their methods of body language are like the untamed extreme of our own dogs'. A mother dog correcting her puppies with a "harsh" snarl may remind us of her ferocious ancestors, but there is in fact a strong biological reason to each and every move a dog makes.

Understanding their body language is crucial to a dog's wellbeing, safety, and trust in his handler. Grounding our relationship with our dogs in empathy, understanding, and mutual trust will promote their continuous development and a lifelong bond with their owner. Though it is very commonly presented in simplistic terms ("a wagging tail must mean he's happy!") dog body language is highly evolved, as previously stated, and also highly complex. Misinterpretation of or ignoring the signals from our dogs comes with consequences for both us and our canines – a dog who knows you will listen to him as much as he listens to you is much more likely to be well-adjusted and able to self-regulate.

All dogs are individual and have their own, personalized ways of expressing themselves and what they need. In different contexts, they can mean different things, and anatomical differences between breeds can make generalizing these differences very difficult.

This handout is my best attempt to generalize most commonly seen canine social behaviors, however, context is key for interpreting all of them. Until our next session, pick **one or two** behaviors to focus on observing in your dog and notate your findings.



POSTURE

A dog's overall posture can tell us so much more than an individual detail. Stiff, stocky, and slow movements indicate a dog that is feeling threatened, alert, uncomfortable, or on the defensive. A dog with its head, ears, and tail high, moving chest or head - forward, is feeling very confident in himself to approach or handle a possibly threatening stimulus. When a dog exhibits this behavior to another dog, especially in close quarters, this is called "posturing" and is an attempt by the dog to show he is the boss. Which dog in the image would you say is posturing?

In contrast, a dog with very loose, "wiggly" body language may feel at ease, happy, and even playful. Think about a puppy and how floppy they seem with their movements – this is close to what a comfortable dog looks like. Their tail may wag or it may not, their ears may be up or down, some dogs even "smile" showing their teeth when they are happy. Because of this individuality, the biggest thing to look for is the overall way they are holding their body. If their movements are loose and free, this is a dog that is comfortable! Can you tell which dog in the image seems more at ease?

The third overall-body language we can look at is defensive aggression – this is cowering, tail tucked, ears back - a dog who feels cornered and ready to defend himself. Some dogs may not show these signs before they bite or bark aggressively, and this is typically associated with the suppression of his initial communication attempts that he is uncomfortable (i.e., his owner punished him for showing signs of discomfort).

Humans also use posture to communicate with dogs, whether we are aware of it or not! The way we are holding ourselves towards our canine tells them a lot about how we are feeling, and our intent. Stiff, firm posture from a human will be just as intimidating, if not more-so, than from a dog!
What are some situations where you have noticed "posturing" or stiff movements in your dog?

1. _____

2. _____

What are some situations where you notice your dog feels most free and at ease?

1. _____

2. _____

LIP / NOSE LICKING

In general, this is seen as the most passive way a dog can communicate its discomfort. It is important to note that discomfort is on a sliding scale and is different for every dog – where one dog may be completely happy to have a person or camera in their face, another dog may be made mildly uncomfortable by this and exhibit repetitive licking of their lips or nose, and even another dog may see this as an extreme threat.



Some instances where you may observe this behavior:

- Spotting another dog from a distance
- Hearing a sudden loud sound
- Being touched on the face
- Being scolded
- Walking on uncomfortable terrain or flooring

The most notable exceptions are when food is involved and the dog licks his lips as a salivatory response, or when a dog is feeling nauseated or has an upset stomach.

What are some situations where you have noticed your dog lip licking?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



SHAKING - OFF

It's not just for water! In fact, this is one of the most common diffusion-behaviors I encounter in dogs. Generally speaking it is used as a stress regulator, and gives the dog a bit of a "mental reset" after they've encountered something exciting or discomforting.

Some instances where you may observe this behavior:

- In play with another dog, as a way to communicate "we're all good" and diffuse excitement or tension.
- Immediately after being pet by a stranger or encountering a strange dog, or other stressful situation
- After coming home from a walk or other outing

When do you notice your dog "shaking-off" regularly?

1. _____

2. _____

HEAD TURN, TURNING AWAY



Generally speaking, a dog who turns his head away is trying to "break focus" from something that is uncomfortable to him. Think about a dog who looks away from his nails being trimmed – without the visual stimulus, he is much more able to handle the discomfort of the clipping. A back-away or full-body turn away from a stimulus is a step above the head-turn - the dog is making a stronger attempt to remove himself from something uncomfortable.

The head-turn is also used to communicate passivity to other dogs. You may see this most often when two friendly dogs meet for the first time, frequently turning their heads away from each other. It is a way to say, "I don't mean you any harm" in a very polite manner.

Humans can also use the head or full-body turn to communicate with dogs, and in fact, these are proven training methods! Upon meeting a dog for the first time, I will often utilize the loose-body language and turning-away of the head to indicate I am not a threat to a new client. A full-body turn is frequently used to discourage dogs who jump to show them they will not be receiving attention.

Some situations where dogs may turn their heads:

- Uncomfortable touch from a human - "I'm uncomfortable so I'll just look away"
- A human approaching in a way that makes the dog uncomfortable
- When seeking attention from a human, a dog may frequently break eye-contact to communicate politely that he is not demanding.

The head turn can be extremely subtle, it is important to note that any turn of the head, from 5 degrees to 130, is considered intended to break focus.

Some situations where dogs may turn their bodies:

- Attempts to pet or approach a dog when he is not in the mood
- Attempts to communicate to another dog that they need to take a break
- In healthy contexts, the dog may present his hind-end to you in an attempt to show you where he would like to be pet.

It is important to note that a full-body turn away is a very obvious signal no matter the degree, as the dog is trying to put space between himself and the stimulus.

What are some situations where you notice your dog intentionally break focus from something he may dislike or be uncomfortable with?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

EYES - WHALE/"SIDE"-EYE, STARING, & BLINKING



The whale-eye, commonly known as "side-eye", is when a dog's gaze diverts towards one side and its scleras (eye-whites) are clearly visible. Generally this is viewed by behavioralists as a clear stress response, though it is important to note that it is not uncommon for dogs to "side-eye" during healthy interactions, such as belly rubs, and even ask for more without moving away. Context is key!

Some instances where you may witness a dog's whale-eye:

- In the process of moving away from an uncomfortable or distressing situation
- When approached by a human while eating or in possession of a toy

- In anxious dogs, whale eyes are very frequently seen as they move towards or away from stressors.

Dogs seem to blink frequently as a form of politeness. As they are predators, fixated eye contact can very well be seen as a challenge or threat – this is why the phrase “don’t stare at the dog” is commonly heard as a part of canine care. Eye contact is a big deal to dogs; staring intently while bearing down over a dog’s head, or a child that is directly at eye-level with a dog, can be seen as extremely intimidating and uncomfortable to them. This is also part of why it is not uncommon for dogs to have a selective fear of children. With more intense breeds, especially, human eye contact alone can be an extremely effective communicator.

Within the same vein, a dog that stares intently at some stimulus with an unblinking gaze, or “hard stare”, is hyperfixated or experiencing a high level of arousal. It is important to take other signals and the environment into account to determine if this is a fight/freeze response, or a situation of strong arousal and excitement.



A dog who frequently makes direct eye-contact with his handler can be interpreted as confident in himself and trusting of his person. “Focus” is one of the first key commands I teach new clients because of the importance of this bond.

What are some observations you have made about your dog’s eye-contact?

1. _____

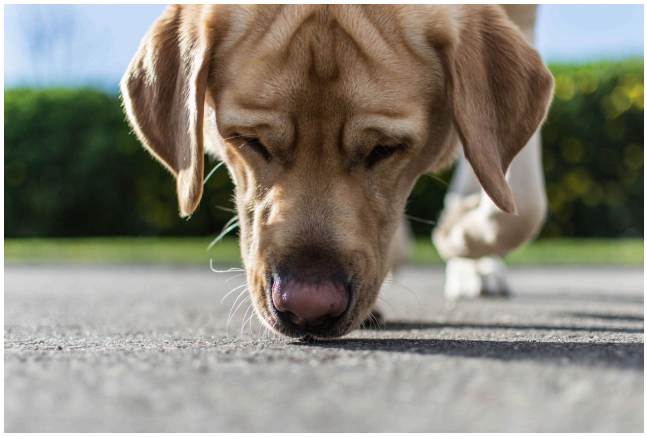
2. _____

3. _____

YAWNING



Yawning is a more mild form of stress-regulation, outside of pre-or-post-sleep routines. It is an easily observable behavior that can frequently occur after loud sounds, an intense play session, or if the dog is denied something he wants. It can also be a precursor to more direct attempts to communicate discomfort.



SNIFFING

A very subtle way of communicating, but with clear intent behind it, sniffing is best interpreted with context. Its meaning can vary greatly, from “please don’t hurt me, I’m not bothering you”, to “I’m having fun but I need a break”, to “Hi, I’m being polite!”. Sniffing has also been shown to reduce stress and increase endorphin release. Sniffing is a dog’s main way of inspecting and understanding the world; it’s not only a communicative tool but a way for them to process their environment. It can be as subtle as a slight head tilt to smell the air, or vigorously sniffing the ground; some dogs may even pull to satisfy an intense need for scent stimulation.

A dog may sniff while approaching another animal or person as a way to communicate they are nonthreatening. They may also sniff while being approached, as a way to regulate stress and calm themselves down.

ZOOMIES



Zoomies are often misconstrued as funny or happy behaviors. In reality, zoomies are the result of intense feelings and the need for regulation. Apart from emotional dysregulation causing this behavior, such a frenzied response also increases the risk of physical injury.

Some instances where you may see zoomies include:

- After grooming, bath, nail trim, or other extended, uncomfortable situations.
- Stressful situations involving yelling & shouting may also trigger a zoomie response
- Puppies may do this frequently as they are learning about the world
- Overenthusiastic greetings from strangers.

A key point to understand when we talk about excitement, is that with animals this is not always positive. Arousal happens for a variety of reasons, from happiness at seeing their person, to prey-drive at seeing a rabbit, to over-arousal and reactivity upon seeing or smelling another dog. Excitement at high levels can escalate quickly to aggression or an out-of-control dog, and regulating it is just as important as regulating stress or discomfort.

With Zoomies, it is important to look at the precursor event to hyper-arousal to understand what may have caused such frenzied energy.

What are some situations where you have noticed your dog responding with Zoomies?

1. _____
2. _____

HUMPING

A bit more complex than simply hormonal or dominant behavior, it is a pseudo-sexual behavior that may be a response to a stressful environment or intense arousal / stimulation.

- Humping a human may indicate discomfort or over-arousal within the interaction
- Humping another dog is a way to relieve stress and make the other dog go away, or cause the owner to remove the offender from the situation and creating a more conditioned response (I hump = the stress goes away).

As this behavior is extremely nuanced it is more important to step-in and deescalate the emotions rather than attempt to correctly interpret such behavior.

GO-BETWEENS



Some dogs may be quick to "go-between" a situation between other dogs or humans as an attempt to de-escalate an interaction he finds distressing. It is commonly labeled as "jealousy" by the wider community of dog owners but like most other methods of communication listed, it holds much more nuance with regard to stress regulation. "Going-between" is an attempt to create distance and make a dog feel safer with his environment.

Some common scenarios in which a dog will "go-between" include:

- Going between another dog and his owner to capture attention
- Going between another dog and a resource to claim the resource
- Going between two dogs at play to reduce the intensity of play

- Going between humans hugging, kissing, or expressing other forms of intimacy
- Going between humans arguing or fighting

What are some situations where you notice your dog “going-between” an interaction?

1. _____

2. _____

DISPLACEMENT BEHAVIORS



A dog may acquire a wide repertoire of seemingly out-of-context behaviors as a coping mechanism to help regulate any number of feelings. Some of these behaviors include but are **certainly not limited to**:

- Diverting focus to sniffing
- Picking up objects from his surroundings (including **scavenging**)
- Stopping all activity to scratch himself

These are natural coping mechanisms that vary with each individual dog, therefore the importance an owner places on any one specific behavior depends largely on its significance to the dog’s ability to regulate himself.

Some examples of displacement behaviors in action include:

- A handler stops to speak to a stranger while on a walk - the dog moves away and begins sniffing the ground
- Upon his owner returning home, a dog may grab a toy in his mouth before running to greet them.
- While playing with another dog, he stops suddenly to scratch himself.

It is important to note that while these can all be very normal reactions to a stimulus, some dogs may incur risks while doing so; for example a dog that frequently scavenges as a way to self-regulate may end up consuming something harmful. It is important to understand the common, everyday ways our dog regulates himself to get a full picture of his wellbeing.

What are some displacement behaviors you have noticed in your dog?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____