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**Turid Rugaas** is an internationally renowned trainer who claims to have decoded the body language of dogs. She is the author of *On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals*. This Norwegian dog trainer has studied the body language of dogs for many years. “We knew a little about communication between wolves,” she said, “so, I wanted to see if dogs were just as skilled at it as the wolves are.” She and a colleague started observing dogs carefully, recording their behavior on video and in photographs. Ms. Rugaas said she found dogs, like wolves, use body signals to solve potential conflicts. “Violence never does any good to humans, or dogs,” she said. “When dogs are giving each other signals like that (*calming signals*) they avoid getting into conflict with each other.” Ms. Rugaas has recorded 30 different signals used by dogs to communicate, including turning away, which helps calm aggressive dogs, and yawning, which shows nervousness.

### Dogs’ Calming Signals

Calming signals can best be described as how canines communicate with each other through the use of body language. Calming signals resolve conflicts, prevent aggression, and reduce stress. They are used between dogs as well as between dogs and any other creature they may see as a threat. Dogs use these signals to calm themselves and other dogs in fearful or stressful situations. The more stressed the dog gets, the less likely the dog is to respond. Unfortunately, when people don’t understand this, the people get more stressed causing the dog to get even more stressed.

Some of the more common calming signals are turning of the head, yawning, nose licking, and sniffing. For example, asking a dog to sit in a harsh tone of voice may result in sniffing rather than sitting. The dog isn’t being disobedient, they are feeling stressed and giving you a signal asking you to calm down.

When a dog gives a calming signal to another dog or a person, the dog expects a signal back — a change in behavior. When the dog doesn’t get that signal back, they may become more stressed or frightened; and when a dog is stressed or frightened they can bite.

If we study the signals dogs use with each other and use them ourselves, we increase our ability to communicate with our dogs. Dogs try to avoid conflict. It is usually US, the human species, who make conflicts between our dogs and ourselves. Lets look at that communication within a scenario: Your dog comes up to you and fusses around you, you command him to SIT. The commanding tone makes your dog yawn before he sits down. You go out the door, he pulls a little and you jerk him back, he then turns his back on you and puts his nose to the ground. You let him off leash at the park and when its time to go home you call your dog. Was your voice a little stressed? Your dog starts moving towards you slowly and in a curve. You think he does it to annoy you and you yell at him. He sniffs the ground, curves even more and looks away from you. He finally comes to you and you scold him or, even worse, punish him physically. He turns his face from you, licking his nose or yawning.

Dogs use these signals as soon as there is anything to calm down. Often signals come in quick movements and you have to really look to see them. By experience you will learn to see them, just as other dogs see them, even other animals, like cats. All it takes is a little patience and practice. Dogs have strong instincts for conflict solving, communication and cooperation. Listed on the next page are examples of calming signals.



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## Calming Signals

**1. Turning of the head** - This can be swift, turning the head to the side and back, or held to the side. This is a sign the dog is not comfortable. Examples of this are often seen: His head may turn if you stoop over him, or if another dog approaches him too fast, or if she finds a camera being pointed in her direction scary. You can use the turning of your head to communicate to a dog that seems scared and starts to growl or bark at you. Sometimes it's not the head, but the eyes only from side to side and look away to avert a direct stare. Your dog may use it if you stare at him or approach front to front.

**2. Turning away** - Turning the side or back to someone is very calming. When dog's play and that game gets wild dogs will start turning their side or back, just to calm the game down a little. Your dog may use it if another dog acts threateningly, or growls at him. You can use it when a dog shows signs of nervousness or aggressiveness to you. If he jumps at you, turn away and most times he will stop. If your approaching a strange dog and you see the dog getting nervous, turn your back and more often than not the dog will come to you.

**3. Licking Noses** - A quick movement of the tongue, so quick it is often missed. Your dog may use it, along with other signals when approaching another dog, if you bend over the dog, hold him tight, grab him or talk to him angrily.

**4. Yawning** - The most intriguing of the signals, at least people seem to enjoy using it. Your dog may yawn when you visit the Vets, when you fight or quarrel in the family, when you hold your dog too tight, when a child comes up to hug him, and many other situations. You can use it when your dog feels uncertain, a little scared, stressed, worried or when you want him to calm down a bit.

**5. Shaking off** - Not to be confused with shaking off water after a rainstorm or bath, this calming signal is used quite often with dogs. Here's an excellent example: an adult dog that is not normally aggressive is playing with a young puppy that becomes a bit too rambunctious. As a result, the adult dog ends up getting accidentally bitten in the ear by the puppy. The adult dog, in turn, puts a big paw on the puppy, 'pins' him to the ground, 'makes eye contact' with him and 'stares him down.' The puppy sees these signals and stops the behavior. The adult dog then releases the puppy, backs up just a bit and 'shakes off.' By exhibiting this physical behavior, the adult dog is 'diffusing' or 'shaking off' the nervous energy around him as if to say 'I'm sorry I did that to you, but don't bite me again!' Hopefully, the puppy will get the message and will be more respectful of the adult in the future.

### NOTE:

When you teach a dog to walk politely you should freeze when the leash goes tight and encourage the dog to come back to you before proceeding with the leash loose. Many traditionalist trainers like to use leash corrections for training a dog to walk politely; however they are in fact punishing the dog for having a loose leash because, in order to give a correction, the leash must be loose.

Strenuous exercise on a daily basis is not good for many dogs as they will be under a continuous state of stress. It is far better to mix an exercise schedule with days that just have low stress activities like walks, and playing games like 'Find It'.