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📢 Communication – Canine Body Language

Over thousands of years of domestication, our dogs have become experts at reading our non-verbal communication. They notice the smallest muscle twitch, subtle eye movements, changes in our breathing, posture and tone of voice.

It is only fair that we step up and learn to do the same—understanding what our dogs are telling us in the only way they can: through their body language and behaviour.

One of the most important things to remember is that body language never happens in isolation. The environment, the situation and everything that has happened before that moment all influence what a dog is communicating.

For example, a dog yawning while lying comfortably on their bed at home is probably simply tired. A dog that yawns and turns their head away while you are putting on their harness may be communicating that they are feeling slightly uncomfortable with the situation.

Likewise, a dog sniffing with a relaxed body, soft face and gently forward ears is likely gathering information about their environment. However, if that same dog suddenly disengages, becomes stiff and remains fixed on sniffing one small spot, they may be using sniffing as a way to regulate themselves because the environment has become overwhelming.

The behaviour may look similar, but the context completely changes its meaning.

It is also important to remember that no single body language signal tells the whole story. We need to look at the entire dog—their posture, movement, facial expression, breathing, tail, ears, the environment and the events leading up to that moment. Body language is like a conversation, not a checklist.

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Behaviour is information

Dogs, just like us, are sentient beings with emotions, needs and preferences. Their behaviour is heavily influenced by the state of their nervous system.

When a dog's nervous system has reached its limit, they become highly alert to anything they perceive as threatening. In that state, learning becomes incredibly difficult.
You can probably relate to this yourself. Think about a time when you felt overwhelmed or stressed. Your heart rate increased, your breathing became quicker, your thoughts raced and it became difficult to think clearly. Your brain was focused on one thing—getting through the situation safely.

Our dogs experience the same physiological changes.

This is why it would be unfair to ask a barking, lunging or shut-down dog to simply perform a behaviour because we want them to. Their brain is no longer in a place where learning is possible.

Behaviour is information. Our job is not to suppress it, but to become fluent in recognising it, acknowledging it and supporting what our dogs are communicating.

Not every dog communicates loudly. Some dogs bark or lunge, while others freeze, crouch, hide, turn away, sniff the ground, slow down or simply choose to leave.

By learning to recognise these early signs, we can adjust the environment before our dog feels the need to escalate their behaviour.

Understanding body language also allows us to become better advocates for our dogs. When we notice what they are communicating and respond with empathy and support, we build trust. Our dogs learn that they are heard, understood and safe with us.

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Instead of asking,

"How can I make my dog sit?"
or
"How can I stop my dog doing XYZ?"

try asking,

"What is my dog experiencing right now?"

"What might they be trying to tell me?"

"What do they need from me in this moment?"

Those questions shift our focus from controlling behaviour to understanding the dog in front of us.

The wonderful illustrator **Lili Chin** has created the accompanying body language illustration to help you begin observing your dog's communication. Use it as a starting point—not as a rule book. As you watch your own dog in different environments and situations, you'll begin to notice that communication is far richer than any single signal. Looking at the whole picture will help you understand not just *what* your dog is doing, but *why*.

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