

Decoding puppy behaviour

To celebrate National Puppy Day, Lorna Winter breaks down the five most common ways puppies communicate with us through their body language, and the best way to respond.

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Puppy eyes

We all know this look, the heart-warming glance from a puppy when they soften their eyes and squint at you. While most of us rightly interpret this as a dog enjoying a particular activity (or wanting another treat), puppies' eyes can tell us so much more.

When a puppy is showing the whites of its eyes, or averting their gaze, it typically is a sign that they are scared, worried or anxious - this is commonly called 'whale eye'.

A hard stare and a furrowed brow often mean that a puppy is stressed and about to react to someone or something. They might even growl to let you know they are feeling uncomfortable. If you do notice a puppy doing this, it is important to take note of its surroundings and try to work out what could be causing the distress, and let the owner know.

Wagging

It is common knowledge that puppies use their tails to communicate. However, wagging tail isn't always a sign that a puppy is happy. It all comes down to the side their tail is wagging. Quaranta et al (2007) have shown that a wag to the left can mean a dog is scared or feeling negative emotions, and may tighten up their body when this happens. The reason for this may be because the left side of the brain controls movement on the right side of the body and vice versa. A tucked tail is also a sign that a puppy is feeling unsure - it is thought that they are trying to hide by covering up their scent glands.

The speed of the wag could also be a sign of how a puppy is feeling. A slow tail wag is often a sign that a dog is still assessing a situation and might not be fully comfortable, so it is always a good idea to ensure they are given space in the clinic so they can assess whatever they might be unsure of.

A fast or frantic tail wag can mean two things, either a puppy is aroused and excited, or it can be a sign of aggression, which is why it is so important to assess the rest of a puppy's body language and the surrounding environment to fully understand what they are trying to tell you.

Boredom

First, it should be reiterated to clients that barking is totally normal and all part of a puppy's natural instinct. It is their way of communicating with us and each other and can express a range of feelings. Owners can often feel like their dog is barking at nothing, but it is important to acknowledge and understand a puppy's bark and think about when or why this is happening. Ask your clients whether they can identify any patterns (Firth, 2023a)

Sometimes, barking can just mean that a puppy is bored and looking for a source of entertainment - for them, barking feels great even if owners disagree! If owners notice this happening a lot, vets can advise them to invest in enrichment toys, such as puppy puzzles, which help boost mental stimulation while also keeping them quiet (Firth, 2023b).

Hiccups

Puppies aren't known for patience, and wolfing food or treats down in seconds can set off the hiccups. Most of the time, hiccups will pass on their own will, but there are a few things you can recommend your clients try if their puppy seems bothered by them:

- Help them relax and breathe more slowly, stroking them, talking in a soft voice and helping soften the breathing and encouraging the hiccups to pass.
- Rub their tummy if they roll over for a rub; make sure they don't force their puppy onto its back though

- Help the puppy to have a drink. This can be quite tricky, so suggest they offer them a sip slowly with water on a spoon.
- Help them slow down when eating meals by using a slow feeder bowl or serving smaller meals more often. Also, let them rest after a meal for about an hour before exercise so their food can go down properly.

Biting

In a puppy, mouthing or nipping behaviours are usually a sign of teething, and this is a very normal part of the development period. It can be a painful time, so they are often nipping to alert to the pain and to work out their own bite strength. To help their teeth and gums (and clients' furniture), treat them to dental chews that are specially designed for puppies, as they are more forgiving for dogs' teething.

If a client is worried about their puppy engaging in aggressive biting, there are some simple things they can do to help this. First, make sure that all their puppy's needs are met - they could be trying to tell them that they're bored, tired or are being handled in a way that they don't like. Again, encourage them to look for patterns in their dog's behaviour and body language. If a puppy's aggressive biting has come on suddenly and they are worried, then encourage clients to come in for a consultation.

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References

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