



**FLORIDA VETERINARY BEHAVIOR SERVICE**  
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**Body Language Spotlight: Avert Gaze**  
Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

The avert gaze is a signal is used to increase distance between dogs, to show that the exhibiting dog is not a threat and to disengage from an interaction between dogs.



In Photo 1, the smaller dog is making direct eye contact which can be intimidating. The larger dogs is averting his gaze to the left so that he can be construed as less of a threat. This interaction ended in play.



Photo 1

In Photo 2 to the right, the dog is attempting to increase distance between she and the person who is sitting across the room from her by turning her gaze away from the person. This dog was afraid of the person.



Photo 2

In Photo 3, the dog is averting her gaze only slightly. She is afraid of the veterinarian and is trying to get her to back away from her. When the veterinarian didn't back away, she amplified the signal by turning her head and shoulders away.

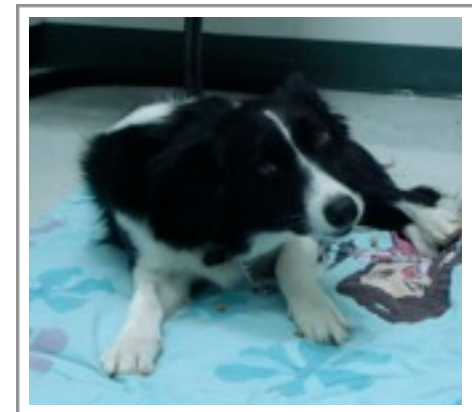


Photo 3



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**Body Language Spotlight: Paw Lift**  
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The paw lift is one of those body language signals that should be interpreted based on context. The best interpretation of this body language signal is that something is about to happen. The dog is anticipating something and the dog's go button is pressed. She could be anticipating a treat from her owner or she could be ready to spring forward and bite her owner. By interpreting the rest of her body language, you can figure out which way she will go.



In Photo 1, below, the dog with his paw lifted is anticipating play. This is an easy one because he is also exhibiting a play bow.

Photo 1



In Photo 2, below, the dog is anticipating a treat from the person sitting in front of her. She has her mouth open and her head lifted because she is barking at the person for attention.

Photo 2



In Photo 3, below, the dog has his ears forward showing that he is alert. He is also positioned under the bench showing that he is afraid. He is anticipating the approach of the person looking at him and considering that she might be a threat.

Photo 3



In Photo 4, below, the puppy has her paw raised as she greets an older, more confident dog. The confident dog is not threatening her, but is alert. She is leaning away and averting her gaze to show that she is not a threat, but her body is relaxed and her tail is up showing that she is not petrified. This interaction ended with play.

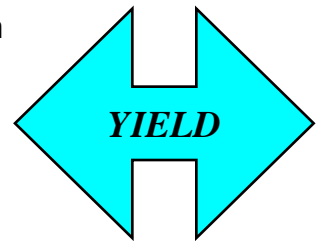




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**Canine Body Language Spotlight: Ears Back**  
Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

The ear carriage of a dog can offer a great deal of information, but it can also be a confusing body language cue to interpret. That is why it is labeled a “yield” signal. When assessing ear carriage consider the context along with other body postures displayed by the individual dog. In general, the farther back the ears are pinned against the head, the more frightened the disposition of the dog.



In Picture 1, the dog's ears are mid way between being forward and being flattened against his head. The skin around his face is pulled back and looks taught. He is stressed.



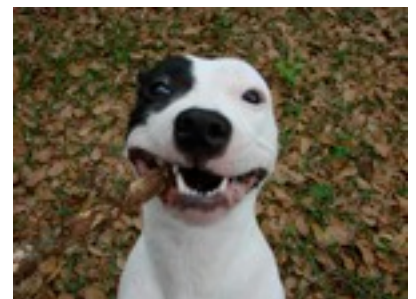
Picture 1

In Picture 2, the dog's ears are held mid way between the back of her head and her eyes, but her face is relaxed. She is sitting calmly. She is deferential, but not stressed or fearful.



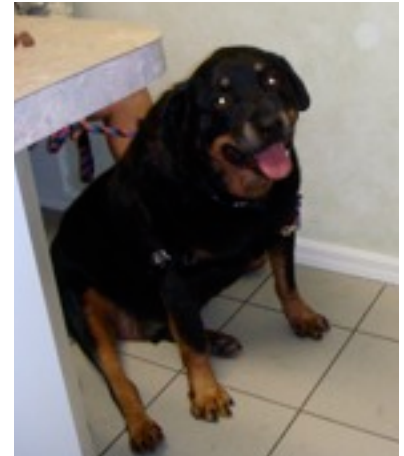
Picture 2

In Picture 3, the dog's ears are held flat against her head, however she has a play face and a stick in her mouth. She is excited, but not fearful or stressed.



Picture 3

The dog in Picture 4 is holding his ears in a relaxed position. They are flaccid and his mouth is hanging open loosely. He is relaxed and friendly.



Picture 4

The dog in Picture 5 has his ears pulled almost flat against her head. She is averting her gaze, flattening her body, [tucking her tail](#) and putting her head down. She is very fearful.



Picture 5



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### **Body Language Spotlight: Inguinal Presentation**

Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

When a dog rolls over onto his back it is called an inguinal presentation signal. Inguinal presentation is a sign of submission and deference. It is a STOP signal. A puppy may exhibit this signal to show that he is not a threat to another dog. When this happens, the older dog generally sniffs the puppy and walks away or just walks away. In general, it is best to assume that a dog who offers the inguinal presentation signal doesn't want you to rub him, but instead wants you to leave him alone. Some dogs offer this position when they are playing, want to be touched and when they are sleeping. The explanations below should help you to know the difference. When in doubt, it is best to walk away.



When the tail is tucked or held close to the body, the dog is signalling that he is submissive or fearful as in the picture to the right. You should not pet dogs offering this signal.



Many dogs have learned that we don't pay much attention to their body language and that we are more likely to rub them when they roll over. These dogs will offer the inguinal presentation to have the pleasure of a massage. Dogs who are offering this signal with the intention of getting a belly rub often, but not always look limp like a noodle as in the picture on the right.



*Courtesy: Jess Feliciano*

If you have watched your dog play with others, you know that this signal can also be a part of play behavior as in the picture on the right. During play, dogs often switch positions varying up who ends up on the bottom. Who ends up on the bottom is not relevant to who is ranked the highest among the dogs.



*Courtesy: Jess Feliciano*

Still other dogs sleep on their back as in the picture on the right. In instances like this, the dog is just comfortable. In cases like this, it is better to let sleeping dogs lie and refrain from petting your dog when he is sleeping.



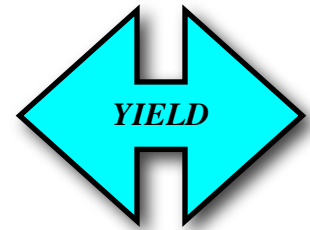
*Courtesy: Carol Seigris*



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## Body Language Spotlight: Mounting Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

This embarrassing behavior has made many an owner shudder as they pull their dog off of another dog apologizing all the way. It is also one of the most misunderstood behaviors--most often linked incorrectly to dominance behavior.



People often incorrectly assume that mounting is due to a need to dominate a person or animal. What about the dog who mounts his stuffed toy or pillow? Is he trying to dominate that too? Nope. To find out why dogs really mount, read on.

Mounting can be considered the same way you would consider a yield sign because it can point to so many different emotional states. Under many circumstances mounting is normal. Mounting is a normal part of mating behavior and play. It is also used to establish rank



between group members. At you may have already guessed, it can simply be an enjoyable way for an understimulated dog to entertain herself. Finally, dogs can also mount as a displacement behavior.

A displacement behavior is exhibited when a dog is anxious, uneasy or overly neurochemically stimulated about a person, animal or situation. Ever twist your hair or bite your nails? If so, you are exhibiting displacement behaviors too!!

Dogs may mount people, other animals and inanimate objects. Females and males mount, even when spayed or neutered. Dogs can also mount or stimulate mounting by other dogs due to medical diseases which affect estrogen and testosterone (e.g., sertoli cell tumors, granulosa cell tumors) or scent profile (e.g., anal sac, urinary tract, uterine or vaginal infections). Administration of certain medications can alter behavior as well.

Like any other behavior, mounting can persist if it is rewarded by the owner's attention (negative or positive). It can also be innately rewarding. The science of learning applies to all behaviors--if you reward it, it will increase in frequency.

What should you do if your dog mounts? If she isn't causing any harm, don't do anything. If she is annoying other dogs with her behavior and the dogs are not correcting her appropriately by growling or snapping, you should intervene. Teach her to come to you when you call and sit.



When you see that she is sidling up to a dog ready to mount, call her over and ask her to sit for a yummy treat. Then, distract her with play or obedience exercises.

If she frequently mounts in certain situations or mounts certain people, she is telling you that those situations make her uneasy or are just too much for her to handle (i.e., too stimulating). Introduce her to those situations with lots of come-sit interactions and lots of other kinetic things to do so that she doesn't engage in that behavior.

If your dog has suddenly started mounting other dogs, people or objects or is suddenly being mounted by others, take your dog to your veterinarian for an examination and possibly labwork. She may have an underlying medical condition.



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### Body Language Spotlight: Play Bow

Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

The play bow is a signal is used to invite another dog, person or animal to engage in play. Each individual dog will have a variation of the play bow depending on her experiences and her breed. Your dog's play bow may not look exactly as described below, however this posture should have most of the elements listed. The play bow generally involves the following postures:



1. Topline angled down toward the head
2. Tail held horizontal to vertical, but not below the topline
3. Relaxed body and face
4. Ears held mid skull or forward
5. Forelimbs touching the ground from paw to elbow
6. Tail wagging





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## Body Language Spotlight: Tail Tucked

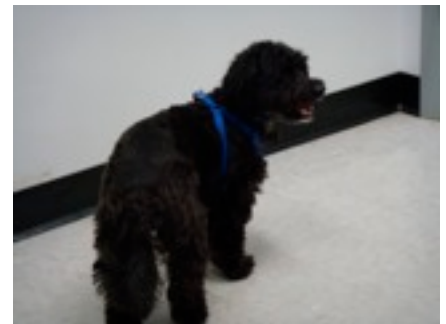
Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

Generally, the tail is a good indicator of a dog's state of mind. This article covers just the carriage, not the movement of the tail. When a dog holds her tail down she is indicating that she is stressed, unsure or fearful. When the tail is tucked beneath the abdomen (Picture 1), the dog is very frightened.



Picture 1  
Courtesy: Dr. Jeannine Berger

When the tail is held just below the topline, the dog might simply be unsure (Picture 2). The degree to which the tail is tucked, depends on the dog, the breed, the level of fear and reinforcement or punishment of that body language signal. Some dogs will not tuck their tail when they are frightened. The author has observed this in some Chow Chows and terrier breeds although there are most likely many more dogs outside of these breeds who do not consistently display this body language signal. That is why it is vitally important to consider all body language cues including: the dog's breed, the context and the movement of the dog in order to yield the most accurate interpretation.



Picture 2

Picture 3 shows a dog who has tucked her tail and also has her ears back, another indicator of fear. There are many different levels of tail carriage.



Picture 3

Interpretation of tail carriage should be done with consideration of the normal tail carriage of the breed of dog. If the breed's normal tail carriage is up over the body as in the case of the Siberian Husky to the right (Picture 4), an unfurled tail should be taken as a sign of fear, uncertainty or stress in that dog.



Picture 4

The tail carriage of the individual dog should also be considered. In the photos below, the normal tail carriage of the dog can easily be compared to the fearful tail carriage. In Picture 5, the dog has his tail in a neutral position. In Picture 6, the dog tucks his tail in response to the owner reaching for him. This owner was instructed to leave a choke chain and leash on her dog all the time and correct the dog with a jerk on the leash whenever he misbehaved. As a result, this dog is afraid of the owner although he is no better behaved. When the owner reaches for him, he shows signs of fear by tucking his tail.



Picture 5



Picture 6



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## Ears Forward

### Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

Dogs can put their ears forward for many reasons. Generally, this means that they are alert or focused on something. It is best to interpret this as a stop signal which means that you should leave the dog alone.



When a dog has his ears so far forward that there are wrinkles between the eyes such as the Labrador Retriever in the picture to the right, the dog is showing an intensity toward the subject on which he is focused--in this case, the veterinarian. When taken in the context of his other body language cues such as dilated pupils and a tense body, it is clear that this dog doesn't want the veterinarian to interact with him.



The dog in the picture to the right also has his ears forward, however they are not pushed forward enough to cause the skin to wrinkle up between his eyes so he is not as intense as the dog above. His ears are slightly to the side and his face is relaxed. His pupils are of a normal size for the light in the room. He is alert, but not aroused. He is looking out the window.



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## Play Face

Lisa Radosta DVM, DACVB

The tail can be cause for much confusion when interpreting the body language of dogs. The tail should generally be judged from two perspectives. First, what is the normal tail carriage of the breed and second where is the tail in relation to the back.



In the tail up-arched position, the tail is held over the back at an angle of 90 degrees of less to the horizontal plane of the back.

A tail held in this position indicates a high level of arousal. While it can be positive such as a strong drive to go after a ball, it can also be negative such as the indication that a dog is about to lunge and bite. That is why this body language signal is regarded as yield signal. When you see this signal, it is time to stop and assess the other body language signals being exhibited by the dog to get an accurate idea of what is he saying.



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