

Understanding “Calming Behaviors”

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Training can be hard work for your dog, which can also be amplified by distractions in the environment. It is recognized that a certain amount of stress is normal when learning new things, but all too often people ignore the warning signs that their dogs are experiencing an overload of pressure during training. With this in mind, the following outlines how to gauge your dog’s feelings and comfort level when interacting with you or participating in training sessions.

Your dog is an expert at “telling” you when he feels stress or anxiety. In order to do this, he displays what are known as “calming signals.” These calming signals are your dog’s way of relieving stress while also communicating to other dogs (and/or you) that he is trying to resolve some inner conflict regarding what is happening around him. It is important to watch for these behaviors in order to help your dog work through stressful situations – whether it’s a training setting or any other situation in his daily routine.

Animal trainer Turid Rugaas coined the term “calming signals” and spent many years identifying the behaviors dogs employ when dealing with stress and conflict. If you see your dog doing any of the following, you should immediately stop and assess your dog and/or the environment. This is necessary in order to ensure that you maintain an acceptable level of comfort for your dog:

- Lip licking
- Yawning
- Excessive water consumption
- Excessive urination
- Shaking body (the same as after a bath)
- Averting eyes
- Sniffing the ground more than normal
- Excessive scratching
- Turning body away from you or something else in the immediate surroundings



If you see your dog displaying any of the above calming signals, you have a couple of options in helping your dog become more comfortable. The first option is to take a little break. Pet your dog gently or have a brief play session. You may also mirror some of the easier calming signals back to your dog by yawning or licking your lips a number of times until your dog can respond back with the same behaviors. These calming behaviors send the message to your dog: “I’m okay, you’re okay.”

Lastly, if your dog is still uncomfortable, remember that you always have the option of postponing your training session to a later date or removing your dog entirely from the situation.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.