

## The Truth About Canine Guilt

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*Whenever my dog does something wrong, I know it immediately because she looks guilty. My best friend says I'm making that up because dogs don't feel guilt. Who's right?*

While dogs can display body language that appears “guilty” the common misconception is what drives these submissive behaviors.

The most typical submissive behaviors in dogs are: ears back, tail tucked, lowered body, avoiding eye contact and rolling on their back to expose their stomach. **Despite how these behaviors may look, they are not an admission of guilt.** Dogs display these behaviors in an attempt to demonstrate that they are not a threat and that they aim to please. It's their way of trying to diffuse someone's angered response to something.



Consider a typical case: Heather goes off to work, leaving her new pup, Zippy, alone. Shortly after she departs, Zippy hears a motorcycle roar down the street. The frightened pup squats and pees to mark his territory, then plays with his toys for a while and dozes off. When Heather comes home, Zippy rushes to greet her at the door, but she immediately sees the puddle on the floor and scolds him.

The next day Heather leaves as usual, the motorcycle roars by, and Zippy marks his territory, then plays with his toys and dozes off. However, this time when he hears Heather's key in the lock, he thinks, "Gee, I was really happy to see her yesterday, but there was something about the way I greeted her that made her mad. This time I'll put my ears back, tuck my tail tight against my tummy, and make myself look as small as possible so she'll know I just want to please her."

Heather sees the puddle on the floor and once again scolds her pet, "Geez Zippy, if you knew it was wrong to pee on the floor, why did you do it?"

This is where the communication breakdown occurs. Heather interprets Zippy's submissive behaviors as evidence of canine guilt, whereas Zippy displays those behaviors in an attempt to ward off another angry response from Heather. Zippy doesn't understand that his pet parent is upset that he urinated in the house.

Another problem with assigning canine guilt is that it undermines the strength of the human-animal bond. If Heather decides that Ziggy's body language shows that he knows not to pee and does it just to irk her, then in her mind, her dog is spiteful and mischievous. On the other hand, if she realizes that his marking communicates a perfectly normal canine attempt to protect his territory in her absence, then she can look for ways to relieve him of this burden, such as involving him in more training to build his confidence and offering him access to a crate in her absence.

So next time your pet looks guilty, understand that they are trying to communicate appeasement. They may not even be aware of what they did to upset you in the first place.

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](http://www.sdhumane.org) to view our behavior and training options,  
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