

# Dog communication

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## Introduction

My goal with this paper is to understand and read my dogs' body language better. I, as so many other dog owners, often tend to put human feelings and behavior on dogs. It is like a Disney cartoon syndrome. I think most people have a lot to learn about how dogs communicate with each other as well as with us humans.

There is one specific scenario that has been puzzling me for some time now. A friend of mine owns a German shepherd, a castrated male, and our dogs have spent a lot of time together ever since my dog was a puppy. (My dog is a female Rottweiler; she is 3 years younger than the German shepherd.) When my dog reached sexual maturity their meeting-behavior changed. My dog always starts by licking the German shepherd around the mouth and puts her nose inside his mouth, if she is so lucky that he opens it. Then my dog gets behind him and starts to ride on him. Throughout this procedure the German shepherd stands still, growling with bared teeth and hackles up. I have been taught that licking the mouth is a submissive behavior while riding is a dominant behavior. I have asked a lot of people about this behavior and the most common answer is that they might not be sure about their rank. But is this the best explanation? What does this behavior really mean?



Dino

Svea

## Dog communication

In communication between dogs you would guess that there sometimes can be misunderstandings because of the wide diversity in morphological differences between different breeds. Some have wrinkled faces, some have no tail and some have hanging ears and so on. If we compare our domestic dog to the wolf we can see that some communication skills have been lost though evolution. According to Per Jensen the wolf has about 60

different facial expressions while they are strongly reduced in the domestic dog; a German shepherd has about 12 different facial expressions.

The simplest form of communication among wolves is the tail, the height and movement of it tells us a lot. A tail that is held straight out from the body or up is a dominant signal while a lowered tail is a signal of submission; this is also true for dogs. But the tail can also be a good indicator to see if a dog is friendly, anxious or aggressive.

In general we can say that a high body posture is a sign of a dominant dog and a low body posture is a sign of a submissive dog. But this is not the whole truth, to truly understand the intentions of a dog we have to look at other visual signals and try to combine them. Let us look at some examples.

Aggressive dogs have a stiff and high body posture with their straight out from the body or up. Their hackles are up, their teeth bared and they are growling.

Dominant/secure dogs have a high but relaxed body posture with the tail straight out or up and the ears in an upright position.

Submissive dogs have a low body posture with a low tail and ears drawn back. They often greet a more dominant dog by licking the mouth of the more dominant from underneath. They can also show that they are submissive by lying on their back showing the belly.

Playing dogs often initiate play by doing a so called play bow. They can jump or run around and it is not uncommon that they bark or growl.

An important way of communication is the olfactory communication. Urination marks is like a contact add that gives other dogs information about age, sex, breeding potential etc. Many dogs urinate more frequently around their home to let others know who is living there and also because the own smells gives a feeling of comfort and security. Males are known to lift their leg when urinating but it is not uncommon that females also show this behavior. This often happens if she finds an interesting smell and/or feels self secure or dominant.

## **Conclusion**

I still haven't got a sure answer to the behavior between my dog and my friends German shepherd.

I first take a look at the German shepherd. He shows a stiff and high body posture, his teeth are bared and he is snarling, his ears and hackles are up and his tail is straight out from his body. I would say that these are signs of an aggressive or dominant dog.

I then look at the Rottweiler. In the beginning she shows a lowered body posture, her tail is low and wagging, her ears a bit drawn back and she is licking the German shepherd around the mouth from underneath. All signs of a submissive dog. But when she goes for his behind her body posture rises, she bares her tail high (almost curled up on her back) and with her ears forward. Sometimes she can bark or growl as she is riding on him. This behavior looks more like the behavior of a dominant or self secure dog.

A possible explanation to this behavior could that Svea first want to insure Dino that she is lower than him in rank and then starts to initiate play.

From what I have read I can see that Svea is a self secure dog with dominant tendencies. She almost always has a high body posture and her tail up. When meeting other dogs she is friendly and curious, but if the dog she is meeting shows aggression toward her she does not back away. On our walks she often lifts her leg when urinating. You can see that she is a relaxed and self secure dog.

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