

Tails for the Win- What Tales Tails Tell

Out on a walk on a warm summer's day with trusty Piddles at your side, you notice ahead there is an unfamiliar dog standing in the road. Piddles stops walking as you do and stands with all four feet firmly planted, head high, tail wagging high and ears at attention. Seeing Piddles, the unknown dog sets her body a little lower, turning to the side and lowers her tail though it still wags a little bit. You look from tail to tail and wonder what just happened. Neither dog has started to bark or whine, just alter body language subtly. Well, subtly to a human, overtly to a dog. While all body language needs to be put into context where canines are concerned, the tail is a particularly expressive appendage and it speaks volumes to those who can interpret it.

Piddles has taken a position of confidence and high-rank while the unknown dog has greeted him submissively. By turning to the side, she does not face head-on, another way to indicate she isn't challenging Piddles and does not want to fight. She may even draw her lips back in a kind of smile to further show she doesn't mean to upset the status quo. Her head is lowered, but she hasn't taken her eyes off Piddles completely, though they dart away and come back. She's nervous and her tale shows that in a low, slow wag, but she isn't aggressive. The two pass without incident.

Dogs Do it Better

While doggy body language is often subtle, it is being recognized as more complex than previously thought. It is a total physical response that canines use to express themselves, which is also a kind of teaching method employed by instructors of foreign languages to younger students. Considered a rather new but extremely effective technique, it has been used by canines since the beginning. It can take some getting used to but once understood, it is very powerful in application and wide in scope. Since tails are among the most visible parts of a dog, they often 'speak' the loudest. For some breeds, tail amputation is still practiced and if that is the case then pay especially close attention to the base of the tail and how it moves.

The Dreaded Generalization

If such things can be placed into generalities, and one would be cautioned against doing so too much, then there are several positions and speeds to look for as indication of Piddles' mood. A high tail almost always means confidence, friendliness, alertness, playfulness, or other more positive emotions. Wagging often accompanies a high tail. Often the entire rear end of the dog will move with the tail wag. If the tail is not wagging, take a look at the body language and stance of the dog; is the tail sticking straight out, curved in a tight C shape or is it bushed up? In this case, back away as the dog is feeling aggressive or protective. A mid-range tail with a wide, fast wag is the happy grin of the doggy realm.

Tails that are down are generally submissive but could indicate fear or nervousness. Straight and low might be the tail hold of the dog in a predatory mood. The tucked tail, used to cover genitalia, displays an especially fearful or submissive dog, one who is trying to diffuse a bad situation like anger from a human or an imminent attack. This is often accompanied by the lowered head and body, yawning or nose licking, sudden interest elsewhere, or anything that can convey his or her wish for a non-threatening intention. A super-relaxed dog may also have a lowered tail without the other body language markers to show added stress.

A very special tail to look out for is the 'wag of danger'. Many humans assume that a wagging tail is only used in the presence of a positive attitude and more than one has made the grievous error of not taking into account all the body language. Have you ever seen a cat wag her tail slowly across the ground in extreme agitation? It is almost never misinterpreted because other obvious signs accompany its usage, but dogs have a similar tell-tale tail. If the dog is standing high, alert and tense and his tail is also high, tight and wagging slowly, this dog is quite possibly about to lunge. She feels on par with a human, not inferior, and is not in an approachable mood. If you meet up with a dog in that stance, do your best to diffuse the situation by turning to the side and not standing directly straight on. Look away (but don't ignore!) yawn or lick your lips and relax your body. These calming actions may clue the dog into your non-aggression and convince her you are not a threat. Otherwise, you may find yourself pitting your small canine incisors against real canine incisors and sadly, there is little contest.