

# What Is Your Dog's Tail Telling You?

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A dog's tail can reveal quite a bit of information. It's just one part of **dog body language** that pet parents should pay attention to, says **Dr. Rachel Malamed**, a veterinary behaviorist based in Los Angeles.

“The tail can give us information about what the pet's emotional state and motivations are,” she says.

Wagging is one of the most commonly observed tail postures. When dogs wag their tails, it's a way for them to communicate their emotions and mental state. A wagging tail indicates that a dog is excited, but not necessarily in a good way.

“It means they're aroused,” says **Dr. Katherine Houpt**, professor emeritus of behavioral medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. “The more excited they are, the more they're going to wag their tails.”

Contrary to popular belief, tail wagging in dogs is not always a friendly invitation for petting or play. “A wagging tail indicates a willingness to interact,” says Malamed. “It may be friendly, or unfriendly and aggressive.”

## Interpreting Dog Body Language

When trying to understand a dog’s tail wagging or tail posture, it’s vital to look at the tail movement or positioning in conjunction with other behavioral signs.

A loose, wagging tail, along with a wiggly butt and relaxed body posture, is often a sign that a dog is happy and approachable, says Malamed. But she stresses that tail movement cannot be generalized or viewed in a vacuum. “The tail must be interpreted along with the rest of the body,” she says.

A stiff, high tail is usually a warning sign to stay away, says Houpt. “When the dog's tail is stiff, standing straight up—that’s a dog that’s pretty aggressive,” she says. “If you're looking at him from the front, it would look as if his tail was growing out of his head.”

A dog’s ears will also help to signal a dog’s overall mood. “You can much more easily gauge a dog's moods by his tail and his ears,” adds Houpt. “Are his ears pulled back? He's probably fearful. Are his ears forward? He's interested.”

A fearful dog will often tuck his tail between his legs, says Malamed. If you see this tail position, it’s important to give the dog some space.

“A fearful dog whose tail is down or tucked in response to a person approaching should not be approached or touched by that person,” she explains. “Dogs whose warning signs or fear postures are not respected may resort to defensive **aggression**, especially if they feel cornered.”

In addition to tail posture, other signs of fear and aggression in dogs may include:

- Ears back
- Hiding or backing away
- Trembling
- Avoiding direct eye contact
- Lip licking
- Yawning
- Furrowed brow
- Panting
- Pacing and restlessness
- Not taking treats
- Not following cues
- Growling, snarling and biting

Paying attention to all of these dog behavior warning signs can help pet parents interpret how their dogs are feeling and act appropriately.

“Understanding normal **canine body language** is essential to communicating and deciphering your pet’s motivations, as well as knowing when your pet’s behavior deviates from normal,” says Malamed.