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Understanding Dog Body Language

FOSTERS & ADOPTERS

Read the whole dog

A wagging tail does not automatically mean friendliness. Consider posture, facial tension, movement, context, and the dog's ability to disengage.

Comfortable signals

Loose body, soft face, fluid movement, relaxed curiosity, and voluntary re-engagement. Even comfortable dogs should be allowed to leave.

Early stress signals

Turning away, lip licking, yawning when not sleepy, panting without heat or exercise, pacing, sniffing the ground to disengage, or avoiding contact.

More urgent signals

Freezing, hard staring, rigid posture, showing teeth, growling, snapping, or lunging. Stop interaction, create distance, and seek help.

What to do

Reduce pressure, increase distance, offer a quiet retreat, and avoid punishment. Never suppress growling; it provides useful information about discomfort.

Record observations

Describe what happened before, during, and after behavior rather than assigning labels such as “dominant” or “bad.” This helps GNR and professionals assess needs.