Listen to your dog, he may be trying to tell you something. Dogs try to communicate to other dogs and animals as well as humans with calming signals. A calming signal in dogs is a way for a dog to communicate that he’s uncomfortable. It’s a bit confusing because calming signals have dual purposes – they are indicators of stress, but is also often used to calm the stressed individual down. Dogs use calming signals to say I’m really stressed; or I’m not comfortable in this situation; or I’m not a threat so please don’t hurt me; or I’m trying to calm myself down, or this is scary; or I’m super excited.

When 2 of my dogs would play together I would observe them constantly communicating to each other with calming signals. When things were getting to a “boiling point”, both did multiple calming signals and the play would stop with no issues. So what are calming signals? Some can be very obvious such as barking, showing teeth and hardening eyes. But we usually overlook the equally important calming signals. Our dogs are always trying to communicate with us, but many dog owners aren’t aware that they are. Once you learn about the different calming signals and watch your dog carefully, you will be amazed and how much he is trying to communicate with you.

Here are a few of the calming signals (this doesn’t include all of them):

Sneezing

Sniffing

Lip licking

Yawning

Paw Raise

Whale eye

Shake off

Looking away (not making eye contact)

Scratching

Lower body position

Have you seen any YouTube videos of a dog being scolded for getting into trash? What I see is a dog that is giving a lot of calming signals. The dog doesn’t feel guilty but really the dog is simply using his calming signals to de-escalate the situation, since he can tell you’re upset with him. The dog is lowering his head, turning his head, yawning just to try and tell you to please calm down.

That said, calming signals are not to be ignored. If your dog shows calming signals surrounding a certain situation, like the vet, you’ve got a job to do! You can work on counter conditioning and desensitization in order to help make your dog feel more comfortable and help to relax your dog at the vet’s office.

If you can leave the situation, do so. Ignoring your dog’s calming signals and forcing them to “just deal with it” will erode their trust in you *and* make their fear worse. Listen to your dog’s calming signals and do what you can to make them more comfortable by giving them treats, bringing along a toy, or creating distance between them and the scary thing.

Never, ever punish a calming signal. Your dog is telling the world, in his own subtle way, that he’s uncomfortable. If you punish him for being polite about it, he might resort to being rude next time.

The best thing you can do for your dog is to learn and understand these calming signals so you can be your dog’s advocate.