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Dogs have a secret language that a surprising number of dog owners know nothing about. It's the language of "calming signals" and it's been written about and taught extensively since the 1990's by Norwegian dog trainer Turid Rugaas.

Calming signals are a system of some 30 gestures and actions dogs use with others and you, too. They're meant to defuse tension and say, "I mean no harm."

Dogs are pack animals and are highly sociable. All dogs know at least some of the signals and some are talented linguists, using most or all of the signals at one time or another. Calming signals are used by the pack to avoid misunderstandings and bites. It's instinctual — an injured member of the pack weakens the entire group. So dogs constantly "talk" things over.

You've seen them if you've ever scolded your dog. They avert their gaze, or lick their lips. They fold their ears back to look more like a puppy. They're asking the crazy human to dial it down a notch calm down.

When two dogs meet on a sidewalk, their natural inclination is not to meet head-on, which they consider bold and possibly aggressive. Left to their own, they'd walk in wide arcs to respect the other dog's space, a calming signal. Instead, they're usually on a leash with us and we plow straight ahead. Watch your dog. He'll give other calming signals, like turning his head away from the other dog, develop a sudden urge to sniff the grass or concrete or lick his lips. The other dog's sending similar signals.

Calming signals are usually subtle and quick — dogs easily read them, but you may not. Once you begin to see them, though, you can't unsee them. You'll realize your dog's been talking his head off all along. You just didn't speak the language.

Observing calming signals can bring you and your dog closer. You're not a dog and may not be able to copy all of them with your dog's fluency. One of the easiest is the eye blink, which

says “I’m okay, you’re okay.” My wolfhounds do it frequently. They smile and blink at me. I smile and blink back.

The first dog I signaled this way some time ago stopped in her tracks and cocked her head. The strange human was *speaking* to her. She wagged her tail, we exchanged greetings and became friends.

Dogs try calming signals on humans because it’s a universal language with them and they’re giving slow learners like us the benefit of the doubt. But if you ignore your dog’s signals, eventually they’ll decide you’re as clever as a rock and stop speaking to you in their secret language. And you’ve missed a bonding opportunity...

You can learn more about calming signals [here](#) at Turid Rugaas’s site.