

Why Your Dog Eats Poop, Rolls Around in Gross Stuff and Other Baffling Things

Does your dog ever leave you shaking your head wondering why he did what he just did? Next time, you don't need to wonder. Just consult this telling list of 35 weird behaviors, and you'll get insight you'd never enjoy otherwise. Even about things we humans consider gross.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Your dog is extremely attentive and perceptive to your visual and verbal cues; you owe it to your dog to take the same interest in his “language”
- Thirty-five scenarios are given to help you translate your dog’s language into human language

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You’ve just arrived home with your bouncing, barking bundle of joy — a new dog! Few things in life can conjure such feelings of excitement and delight — and then, in the blink of an eye, such feelings of frustration. The truth is, bringing home a dog isn’t all cuddles and kisses.

There’s housetraining to consider, for starters. Not to mention that, if your dog is a puppy, he probably hasn’t yet learned his manners and doesn’t know (or care) that it’s not acceptable to chew on your shoes, clothing or fingers.

Your little furball is also going through a major transition in moving to a new home, and he may be stressed out, fearful and anxious. In these initial moments, good communication between you and your pet is crucial to developing your bond.

It’s imperative that you understand what your dog is “saying” and why he’s acting a certain way, not only to enjoy your relationship but also to prevent you from becoming unjustly angry with your dog.

This is true for all pet owners, including those who are adjusting to life with a new dog and those who have had their dogs for many years. Your dog is extremely attentive and perceptive to your visual and verbal cues; you owe it to your dog to take the same interest in his “language.”

35 Tips for Translating Your Dog’s ‘Language’

The next time your dog does something you don’t understand, consult the list below for translation. These insights were excerpted from “Puppy’s First Steps: The Whole-Dog Approach to Raising a Happy, Healthy, Well-Behaved Puppy,” a book written by Dr. Nicholas Dodman, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at the Tufts University

1. **Moves away when you pet his head** — He may not like the way it feels. This is also a signal of dominance to a dog. Most dogs prefer to be pet on their chin, front of chest or side of the face.
2. **Moves in circles before going to sleep** — Your dog's ancestors did this to flatten down grass and make a cozy nest. Your dog is acting on his genetic instinct.
3. **Barks at the mailman, even though he knows him well** — The mailman leaves reliably every time your dog barks at him. So, your dog continues to bark and believes he is showing his power over the mailman.
4. **Grunts** — Puppies grunt when they're feeling content and happy.
5. **Whines** — Puppies whine when they're feeling cold, hungry or lonely. Soothe your pup by covering him with a warm blanket, feeding him or giving him attention in regular intervals.
6. **Blinks** — Your dog is thinking and may be contemplating whether to follow a given command.
7. **Yawns** — Your dog may yawn if he's tired, yes, but also when he's feeling stressed.
8. **Licks his lips** — Your dog is nervous or anxious. It's also a sign of submission.
9. **Licks you** — Your dog is seeking your attention and/or the positive reaction he gets when licking you. Likely, your dog learned along the way that when he licks you, he gets attention, and that's why he keeps doing it. In some cases, licking may also be used as a sign of dominance.
10. **Climbs onto the couch** — Does your dog insist on sitting on the couch even when you've told him not to? Puppies may try to reach higher locations in a show of dominance, but sometimes your dog may just like the soft feel of your couch better than the hard floor.
11. **Paws the ground after eliminating** — Your dog is further marking his territory by leaving behind a visual sign (disturbed soil) and scent (likely from sweat glands on his paws), noting that he's been there.
12. **Eats feces** — Poop-eating behavior, known as coprophagia, is common in puppies, who may have witnessed their mother eating their feces in order to keep their living quarters clean. In older dogs, coprophagia may have medical or behavioral explanations and can be a sign of stress.
13. **Rolls around in stinky, gross stuff** — Rolling in a stinky patch of grass or dirt transfers the scent to your dog, allowing him to advertise where he's been. It may also be an ingrained behavior from your dog's wild ancestors, who may have rolled in messes to cover up their own scent and better avoid predators.
14. **Eats grass** — There are two primary reasons why dogs eat grass. Number one is to use as a purgative, and number two is simply because they want to! (Grass may meet some physiological requirements his instincts tell him he needs.)
15. **Sniffs around before urinating** — Your dog is taking in the other scents in the area before deciding where to eliminate. He may also be looking for a spot that hasn't been urinated on previously by another dog.
16. **Sniffs other dogs' behinds** — A dog's behind generates pheromones that let other dogs know his identity.
17. **Pants** — Your dog pants to help regulate his body temperature and may also do so when he's feeling anxious.
18. **Acts happier around dogs of the same breed** — If your dog has had pleasurable experiences with siblings and other dogs of the same breed, he may expect that to continue in other dogs that look like them (and him).
19. **Play bows** — If your dog sticks his behind in the air while "bowing down" with his head and paws close to the ground, he's feeling happy and playful.

20. **Chases his own tail** — This may begin in a dog with a high predatory drive and no outlet to live out this chasing instinct. In some dogs, the behavior can become obsessive and lead to anxiety and medical issues. Bull Terriers and German Shepherds are among the breeds most likely to chase their tails.
21. **Nurse on blankets or stuffed animals** — If a puppy is weaned from his mother too soon, he may continue to suckle on soft, non-living items like blankets. Doberman Pinschers and Dachshunds are particularly likely to show this behavior if they're denied access to their mothers too early.
22. **Sticks his head out the car window** — Your dog does this because it's fun and he can sample the scents flying by. Do not, however, let your dog do this as he can be easily, and severely, injured.
23. **Barks at another dog with his head held high** — This is a sign of dominance, especially when paired with direct eye contact, tense body posture and an erect tail.
24. **Barks at another dog with his ears pressed to his head** — This is a sign of fear or submission, especially when paired with a tail tucked between his legs and eyes that dart from side to side.
25. **Digs fast and furiously** — Some dogs dig because of a predatory instinct (such as terriers, which were bred to chase small animals that would burrow into the ground). Other dogs dig to simulate what they may have done in the wild to shield themselves from the elements (such as digging a den in snow or dirt).
26. **Takes food out of his bowl and eats it in another room** — A dog that is lower in the pack order might do this in order to protect his food from a competing alpha dog (even if there isn't one present!).
27. **Hides treats rather than eating them** — Your dog may hide a bone or other coveted treat in the backyard because he's reverting back to his wild roots. In the wild, stashing food for later, to be located by scent, ensured he'd have a spare meal when he really needed it.
28. **Runs in his sleep** — Your dog is dreaming, probably about running to catch a squirrel or other creature.
29. **Wags his tail fast or slow** — The speed of your dog's tail wagging is like an energy indicator. If he's very excited and energetic, his tail will wag fast. It will wag slower when he's interested but not fully raring to go.
30. **Puts his tail between his legs** — This is a signal of submission, uncertainty, anxiety and/or fear.
31. **Holds his tail upright** — This is a sign of interest, dominance and confidence.
32. **Chews socks or slippers** — Your dog probably lacks appropriate chew toys (with the substrate he desires, i.e., soft cloth) to get in his chewing fix, and if you chase him around the house to get your socks back, he'll think it is a really great game.
33. **Sniffs people in the groin area** — A dog can read the pheromones coming from that area, even detecting whether you're fearful or confident.
34. **Shakes toys back and forth in his mouth** — Your dog is doing what he would have done in the wild, which is shake his prey at the neck to kill it.
35. **Has his back hairs up** — Known as piloerection, this is not a response your dog can control. It occurs when your dog's fight-or-flight stress response is triggered and releases epinephrine, causing muscles to contract that raise the hairs.

Some of these behaviors come prewired in your puppy, but many of them are learned or promoted through training (intentionally or inadvertently). The best way to ensure your puppy is developing the correct social and behavior skills and address training issues as they come up is to keep your growing bundle of fur in progressive, positive puppy classes for as long as possible. (I recommend the first full year of life, because I want my patients to be superstars when it comes to lifelong, impressive behaviors.)

The more you understand about your dog's behavior and methods of communication, the closer your bond is likely to be. If you want to take it a step further, you can listen to my interview with Dr. Isla Fishburn, a holistic dog behaviorist, below. Dr. Fishburn believes in not only communicating with your dog but also learning to listen to him and give him choices about food, healing and more.

[Download Interview Transcript](#)

Sources and References

¹ [The Bark \(Archived\)](#)
