



# Understanding Appeasement in Dogs



## What is appeasement?

Appeasement (also called “calming signals”) refers to a set of behaviors that a dog performs to show that they are not a threat. Humans often read human emotions into dogs who show these behaviors. We say they look guilty, or that they “know what they did wrong.” In reality, appeasement is a response to a person’s reaction, not the dog’s initial action.

## Examples of appeasement:

- A dog is startled by a human who suddenly comes around a corner. After the initial startle response, the dog jumps up on the person, with ears back (but not pinned), and licks the person’s face. The person pushes the dog away, but the dog jumps back up and licks the person’s face frantically, with their body wiggly and loose.
- An unknown person enters a dog’s room while the dog is resting in their crate. The dog pokes their head out of the crate, lips pulled back, exposing teeth (appeasement smile/fearful grimace). The dog moves forward with a low, wiggly body, head low, and tail low but wagging widely.
- A dog chewed the couch while their guardian was away. The person returns home and sees the couch. Their body language lets the dog know that they are not happy, so the dog approaches with a low body, licking lips. The person scolds the dog, who begins urinating while continuing to approach.

In the scenarios above, you may notice that dogs showing appeasement approached the “scary thing” despite being worried about it. In the first and third scenarios, the dogs *intensified* their appeasement behaviors when the humans continued to react negatively.

## Why is it important to know about appeasement?

Many people perceive appeasement behaviors, especially jumping, licking, and urinating, as “rude.” As a result, they try to punish the behavior, usually by scolding the dog or pushing them away. This makes the dog more worried, which could lead the dog to escalate the behavior. Initially, many dogs show more appeasement behaviors, but over time, they may learn that appeasement doesn’t work. They might then resort to other, riskier, behaviors when they are worried.

## What should we do if a dog shows appeasement behaviors?

Take steps to ensure your dog feels safe and confident around you:

- Give them plenty of space and use treat and retreat to build a relationship.
- Use consent petting and always respect any signs of discomfort. Offer plenty of choices in the environment (toys, chew treats, resting places, etc.) so your dog has options if they prefer not to interact with you.
- Ask for alternative behaviors *instead* of punishing behaviors you don’t like. If your dog is jumping up and licking your face, ask them for a sit or a nose target, and then reward that. Don’t scold or push them away.

A confident, well-socialized dog will rarely feel the need to appease! They understand that people are predictors of good things and are not scary. Use management and force-free, positive reinforcement-based training methods to build your pup’s confidence:

- Use counter-conditioning and desensitization to help them learn that the world isn’t so scary.
- Reward your dog for behaviors that you like – this teaches them that their actions can make good things happen!
- When possible, avoid actions that you know will trigger appeasement behavior.
- It’s okay to reassure a scared dog! Contrary to popular belief, this will not reinforce their fear. Use a soothing tone of voice, gentle petting, and give your pup the choice to move away.

Although appeasement behaviors are usually harmless to humans, they are a sign that a dog is worried. It’s important to address the dog’s emotional state, both to improve their quality of life and to ensure that they don’t feel the need to escalate their communication.