



# Not a tall tail tale

Dog's tail wagging action is a barometer to their happiness and anxiety levels

Italian researchers have uncovered the secret language that reveals dogs' emotions—the wagging of their tails. Of course we've thought for the longest time that a wagging tail communicates happiness, but through a study of over 30 dogs, researchers were able to reveal tail-wagging expresses much more. It's the direction of the tail wagging and the intensity that dogs display that is able to tell us if they're very excited and happy to mildly interested through to expressions of anxiety.

To conduct the study, researchers used equal number of intact males and bitches. All were family pets and all were between the ages of one and six years old. A range of stimuli was used to elicit a response from each dog. These included their owner, a cat, an unfamiliar human and a large unfamiliar dog.

The researchers discovered that when the dogs were presented with their owner—presuming this is a positive experience—their tails wagged wildly to the right hand side. An unfamiliar human had a right-side bias, yet the tail wagged with less intensity.

Presenting a cat also got a right-sided wag and the tail again was less vigorous. Interestingly, when a large, unfamiliar dog was introduced into the experiment, the direction of the tail reversed to the left hand side. The dog chosen was an intimidating looking and unfamiliar four-year-old male Belgian shepherd malinois.

Researchers from the University of Trieste concluded that the appearance of an unfamiliar dog suggested anxiety and an indicator that the dog wanted to retreat. When no stimuli was presented, the tails continued to wag, however this was a left side bias. This suggested that dogs are happier with some form of company.

The findings of this study—linked to the fact that dogs have two brain hemispheres—could serve humans and dog trainers to read dogs better. Dogs' inbuilt 'Wag-O-Meter' could help us all have a non-invasive tool to estimate their emotions and emotional state.



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