

I always thought when a dog wagged its tail it meant he was happy. Sometimes when my dog is in chewing on a bone and I reach down to pet him, he wags his tail, but he also growls at me. Why would he be growling and wagging his tail at the same time?

Dog behaviorists who have studied the act of tail wagging have shown us that there are different types of wags. They are very important in communication between dogs, and we can learn how to interpret them to better understand a dog's emotions. A tail that is held high or straight back but is swinging loosely is confident and friendly, wanting to interact. Some dogs are so exuberantly happy that they wag their whole hind end along with their tail. A tail held in a lower position while wagging is a less confident dog and is showing some signs of submission. A stiff, slower swish of the tail (sometimes only the tip of tail) could mean just the opposite- the dog is very confident and assertive. This is the type of wag that your dog may be demonstrating to signal you to move away. It is good to try to differentiate his various tail positions in different circumstances so you can avoid potential aggressive reactions. Besides looking at his tail, look at the rest of him during these situations. Besides growling as a sign of potential aggression, are his eyes staring straight at you, are his ears stiff, held higher or flat back, is the hair standing up on his back? These are all signs a dog in warning mode may exhibit.

He may be doing the unhappy wag if he is resource guarding. That means either he doesn't want you near his precious bone. You can work with him with behavior modification exercises to change his guarding behavior to allow you to come near him and even eventually to take his bone away in exchange for a different tasty treat. This behavior used to be called dominance aggression, but now is referred to by behaviorists as resource guarding and can also occur if a dog is approached when he is eating or lying in his bed. You can avoid being bitten if you are aware of your dog's temperament and avoid the circumstances that might elicit aggression while working with a veterinarian trained in dog behavior to try to adjust his attitude.

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