

## **Understanding Livestock Behavior: A Guide to Reading Animal Body Language**

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Effective livestock management begins with observation. For 4-H youth involved in livestock projects, learning to recognize and interpret animal body language is one of the most important skills they can develop. While animals cannot speak, they are constantly communicating through their posture, movement, facial expressions, and vocalizations. Being able to “read” an animal not only improves handling and training but also promotes safety and enhances animal welfare.

Each species of livestock has its own way of expressing comfort, stress, curiosity, or fear. A relaxed animal typically appears calm, with a natural stance, soft eyes, and smooth movements. In contrast, an animal that is anxious or uncertain may display signs such as wide eyes, raised heads, pinned ears, tail flicking, or tense body posture. For example, cattle may stomp or swish their tails when irritated, pigs may squeal and dart away when stressed, sheep may freeze or bolt when frightened, and goats may stiffen or rear when uncomfortable. These behaviors are all forms of communication that, when noticed and understood, allow the handler to respond appropriately.

Developing an awareness of these subtle cues is essential to building trust and cooperation between youth and their animals. By adjusting their own behavior in response—slowing down, using quieter tones, or allowing the animal time to acclimate—young handlers can reduce stress and improve the animal's responsiveness. This not only leads to better training outcomes but also contributes to a more positive showing experience.

In addition to safety and performance, learning to read livestock behavior teaches youth important life skills such as patience, empathy, and emotional regulation. It encourages a deeper connection with animals and fosters a sense of responsibility that goes beyond feeding and grooming. When 4-H members take the time to observe their animals and respond with intention, they become more than just project owners—they become true stockmen and women.

Reading body language is a skill that improves with practice. The more time youth spend with their animals, the more familiar they become with each animal's individual personality and communication style. Over time, they begin to anticipate behavior, prevent problems before they arise, and fine-tune their own instincts as handlers. That's when the real magic of the 4-H livestock experience begins—not just in the show ring, but in the bond between youth and animal that is built day by day, moment by moment, through understanding.