Understanding Reptile Behavior: What Reptile Body Language Can Tell You

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Reptile behavior can be very hard to interpret, especially if you are a new reptile owner. Actions that you may think are unimportant can actually be how your reptile signals that it is content or upset. In this article we will discuss some things that reptiles do to communicate with their owners.

How do I know if my reptile is upset?

In general, if a reptile doesn't like what you are doing, whether that is handling him, petting him, or anything else, he will try to get away from you or possibly even bite. Signs that something in his environment is making your reptile feel insecure, uncomfortable, or in pain include:

- Breathing heavily with lots of noticeable movement in the rib cage area
- Fussiness, squirming, and hissing in a usually tame reptile
- Trying to climb you or get away
- Drawing away when you go to pick him up
- Striking and biting

Different types of reptiles will have different behaviors to indicate their discomfort and insecurity.

Lizards: Digs claws into you
Tries to climb you
Whips tail around
Puffs up
Gapes his mouth open

Snakes: Wraps himself very tightly around your arm, leg, or torso
Draws back with his head and neck lifted off the ground (an S-curve)
Buzzes his tail
Thrashes around in your hands
Strikes at you (full strikes or false strikes)

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Chelonians: "Swims" (flails legs) around in mid-air
Retreats into his shell

For example, a lizard that is content and comfortable while being handled will sit on your arm, looking around and flicking his tongue occasionally. A lizard that is upset or agitated will try to twist around in your hands or dart around, opening his mouth. Snakes that are used to being handled and enjoy it will have smooth movements when being held, while snakes that are frightened or stressed will have jerky, panicked movements and thrash around.

Why are reptiles so aggressive?

The truth is that when a reptile reacts in a negative way to a human, it does not mean that the reptile is trying to hurt you. Snapping and striking at things he views as predators is an instinctive behavior and a natural reaction if the reptile feels he needs to defend himself or his territory. There are no malicious thoughts behind this behavior, and you should not contribute human emotions to reptile behavior.

How do I know if my reptile likes what I'm doing?

Though some reptiles will not want to be handled, there are some that will get used to it and even enjoy it. Signs that your reptile likes being handled include:

- Doesn't try to run away if given the chance
- Doesn't hiss, bite, or strike at you
- Goes to sleep in your arms or in your shirt
- Doesn't try to avoid your touch
- Stays near you if you stop petting him

Some owners say that their lizards bob their heads as a greeting. This can be a sign of recognition, or it can be a defense mechanism. The other movements your reptile is making will let you know which one it is.

What are the signs that something is wrong?

Because our reptiles can't talk to us, we need to learn how to interpret certain behaviors that can indicate that they are sick or stressed. These behaviors include:

- Lots of hiding
- Loss of appetite
- Refusal of food
- Lethargy
- Inactivity

All of these can be signs that there is a health problem or that your reptile is stressed. If you see any of these behaviors, schedule a veterinary appointment.

The more time you spend around your reptile, the more easily you will be able to

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read his body language and accurately interpret what he is trying to communicate to you.

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