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Learn To See What Your Dog Is Telling You – Or Not!
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The inescapable fact that dogs are not people and do not communicate in the same way that people do should be obvious. However, in our 25 plus years of working with people and pets with behavior “issues”, we discovered that people naturally interpret their dog’s behavior based on human communication patterns.

Anthropomorphism

Attributing human attributes to animals is a phenomenon called anthropomorphism and in our experience this contributes to many problems and miscommunications between people and pets. The most common anthropomorphic interpretation we hear is some variation of “My dog knows it’s wrong, but he does it anyway”. “It” could be any unwanted behavior including not coming when called, soiling in the house, destructive behavior, or barking too much.

No Moral Sense of Right and Wrong for Dogs

One explanation for what is actually happening is that your dog has learned a punishment discrimination. For example your dog wouldn’t dream of getting in the trash when you are present to scold her, but getting into the trash when she’s home alone results not in unpleasant consequences, but pleasant ones (she gets to eat left-overs, lick candy wrappers, etc.).

Your dog cannot develop a sense of which behaviors are morally “right” or “wrong”, but can instead learn “don’t get in the trash when mom or dad is around” but “getting in the trash when I’m by myself is great fun”.

No Guilt Either

The natural follow-up to this scenario is believing your dog displays guilt when you come home and find a “mess”. The “mess” could be trash strewn around, a chewed up shoe, or a puddle on the floor. What we label “guilty looks” are either appeasement or avoidance behaviors dogs display when they feel threatened. Pulling the ears back, lowering the head and tail, avoiding eye contact and even rolling over and urinating are not expressions of guilt but merely your dog’s reaction to your threatening words and body language when you find “the mess”.

Some dogs will react this way when they've made "a mess" that you haven't yet seen. The punishment discrimination they've learned in this case is that when both "a mess" and you are present at the same time, bad things will happen. Your dog may not even greet you at the door when there's a mess, in anticipation of being disciplined. Punishment affects *only* the behavior the dog is displaying at the time. Consequently, using interactive punishment to teach your dog not to do something if you don't see him doing it is futile.

Miscommunications During Greetings

From a safety viewpoint, perhaps the most significant miscommunication between people and dogs occurs during greetings. When greeting an unfamiliar dog, most people will face the dog, bend over at the waist, look at the dog and put their hand out either for the dog to sniff or to touch the dog, and even take a few steps toward the dog.

From the dog's point of view these behaviors are threatening, not friendly. Eye contact, front-front approaches, and coming over the dog's head with your hand, torso, or both are all body postures that are components of offensive threats in dog language.

How to Greet an Unfamiliar Dog

When you want to say hello to a dog, after asking the owner if it's OK, speak softly to the dog and let the dog come to you rather than you going to the dog. If the dog does not approach you, that is a communication signal you should respect. He's telling you he's not interested so you should *leave the dog alone!*

If the dog does approach, stand up straight (or bend at the knees or sit down to greet small dogs), avoid making eye contact (look straight ahead, off to the side or down at the ground), keep your hand at your side until the dog is close enough to pet, and then scratch him under the chin first, not over his head. Do not hold your hand out for the dog to sniff (read - bite!)

Dog owners should never force their dogs to sit and tolerate an approach from someone, especially a child, if the dog is trying to move away and avoid the stranger. Forcing your dog to accept contact from a person, when he clearly doesn't want to, is a perfect set up for a bite.

The Truth about "Calming Signals"

This term has become popular in the dog training world in the past 10 years, but this interpretation of dog behavior is not supported by the scientific literature. Yawning, lip licking and self-grooming are behaviors dogs show when they are uncertain about how to respond in a situation. These are called displacement behaviors because they are displaced out of their normal context. There is no evidence these behaviors have communicative value to others.

In other words your dog may yawn when approached by a stranger because he's not sure whether to back away or allow contact. The purpose of the yawn is not to communicate

anything to you or to other dogs, and you yawning back at him will not have a “calming” influence.

Other behaviors that have been lumped into the “calming signals” label include avoiding eye contact, and turning the head away. These are submissive behaviors whose communicative value has been demonstrated. Dogs recognize them as appeasement behaviors that serve to “turn off” threats and aggression from the other dog.

If you want to learn more about dog body language, view our DVD “Canine Body Postures”, that is available on all our websites, including www.HelpingFido.com. Also, visit Pets.com and click on the “If Your Pet Could Talk” link to participate in an online educational program Dr. Hetts developed with PetSmart®.

Dr. Suzanne Hetts and Dr. Dan Estep are co-owners of Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. in Littleton, Colorado. For more behavior education for pet parents and pet professionals visit AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com, HelpingFido.com, HelpingKitty.com and BehaviorEducationNetwork.com.