

Stop Talking and Start Communicating

Dogs are wonderful—we all agree! Where would we be without them? How many of us can't wait to come home each day to be greeted by wonderful wagging tails, delightful wiggles and syrupy sweet kisses from our favorite canine? Dogs are always happy to see us, never complain about their rotten day, don't argue about what to fix for dinner or what television program to watch. In fact, they don't actually "speak" our language at all, which, of course, is not news to anyone.

BY DEBORAH ROSEN

IT'S ALL BLAH, BLAH, BLAH TO DOGS

In general, humans do an abysmal job of communicating with their dogs, starting with the use of verbal language. We are constantly talking—we talk at home with the family; we talk on the phone; the television is on and people are doing nothing but talking. Where your dog is concerned, verbal language has been rendered meaningless. So, on the occasion when you actually do speak directly to your dog, chances are good that he hasn't got a clue what you are saying.

LEARN TO SPEAK "DOG"

Other ways to communicate with your dog will get your message across much better. Certainly, the intent is not to stop speaking entirely, but instead, to limit verbal communication and to put more emphasis on how words are used, especially when you are asking for the dog's attention or want her to do something. By choosing the right words, adjusting the tone, pitch or volume of those words, or by using sounds instead of words, you are learning to more



effectively communicate. In addition, you may want to consider incorporating other modes of communication that are more meaningful to dogs, like body language and facial expressions.

In her wonderful book, *The Other End of the Leash*, Patricia McConnell refers to the wide variety of ways that dogs communicate with each other; she insists that understanding these other modes helps us to communicate better with our dogs. Dogs are instinctively conditioned to read nonverbal cues and are "tuned in" to us in ways that we are not aware of.

With keen powers of observation, dogs have learned to read our facial expressions and body language as they do with each other. When a dog looks "guilty" for "messing" in the house, it's not really guilt you see. That is a more complex emotion reserved for humans. The dog is instead reacting to your emotions—disappointment, anger, or, perhaps, frustration. Through your facial expression you've told the dog that he's done a bad thing. The opposite is also true. Dogs know when we are happy with them by observing our facial expressions.

OUCH! THAT HURTS!

This knowledge will help explain why a simple facial expression from you can tell your dog, quite clearly, when you are pleased or unhappy with something she has done. To illustrate, a great remedy for a teething puppy that is unintentionally inflicting harm onto her owner is to yell "OUCH!" to first interrupt the behavior and then to quickly scrunch up your face into a grimace. Some call this an "evil eye." It's the look you saw on Clint Eastwood's face in almost every movie he's ever made—right before he shoots the bad guy.

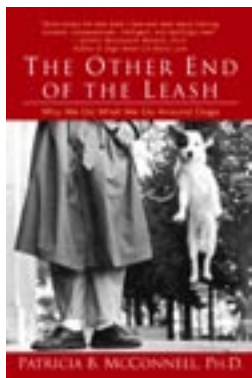
For whatever reason, it is extremely difficult for people to give their dog the "evil eye" without laughing—especially with puppies. "How can I do that—she's being so cute!" On the contrary, she's not being cute, she's being quite naughty. If you want the behavior to stop (instead of worsen), you must tell the puppy in terms she can understand that what she's doing hurts and must not continue.



Body language is also an extremely useful way to communicate information to your dog. For instance, when you're out for a walk, should you encounter a dog or even another person you may find frightening, you can send a message of fear to the dog through both facial expressions and body language. If you become hesitant or if your movements become stiff, in dog language you are signaling danger and warning of unfriendly or potentially aggressive behavior approaching.

Even if you do feel a little fearful, it is better to maintain a relaxed appearance on the outside. If you're relaxed and confident, the dog will be too.

On your next walk, check to see how your jaw and lips respond as you approach a strange dog on the street. Again, these are things your dog observes over time. Dogs have been studied closely and have been found to be masterful at human observation. Even a slight change in our countenance is a huge message to a dog. What we think of as a subtle change may be interpreted as extremely important to a dog. So, a tightening of the lips and jaw, holding your breath or uneven breathing patterns will also signal to the dog that danger is coming.



Bookshelf

The Other End of the Leash
by Patricia McConnell, Ph.D.
(\$14.95, Random House)

McConnell shares a new perspective on our relationship with dogs and demonstrates how even the slightest changes in your voice and the way you stand can help your dog understand what you want.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY...

Another way of signaling dogs on walks is through your tone of voice. In my "Growly Class," geared toward dogs with aggressive tendencies toward other dogs, I coach owners on how to "leash manage" their dogs and how to use their voices to convey confidence. It's important to stay upbeat and happy when you encounter another dog, even if there is indication of animosity. Dogs have learned to read tension in your voice, which comes in various forms. The best thing to do when encountering another dog is to use an upbeat "happy voice" to avoid signaling fear.

USE HAND SIGNALS INSTEAD

What about hand signals? Dogs love them and respond infinitely better to visual cues than to verbal requests. If you think about it, there are so many different ways to say a word. Change the tone, pitch and volume, and "sit" can be said in countless ways. Since we already know that dogs are interpreting our nonverbal cues we might as well put this propensity to good use. As long as owners are able to be consistent (a little practice will help) there is little variation, if any, with hand signals. To dogs, the hand signal or visual cue must be like a breath of fresh air. "Ah ha! Now I understand what he wants me to do!"

LET'S TALK!

Now, let's get back to human language since it's unlikely we'll stop talking to our dogs. Any of you who have been to a reputable dog training class will know that it's never wise to use a verbal request more than once. Any word used more than once without a response from the dog is an invitation for the dog to ignore you. Repeating a word over and over will simply render the word and the request meaningless.

The analogy I often use is the one where you ask your child to go clean his room. The more you ask the more the room stays untouched. If instead, you ask once and link the completion of the task to a consequence, chances are better the room will get cleaned. For example, the statement, "When your room is clean you will be able to see your favorite television program," makes the verbal message much more potent.



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Best Behavior continued from previous page...

Next time you ask your dog to sit, say the word only once, hold a treat over his head and then wait patiently (perhaps as long as 15 seconds). If he sits quickly deliver the treat with lavish praise. If he doesn't, walk away with your treat and say "Ah, too bad!" with a disappointed and dismissive tone. After a short while, you'll see just how effective using one word can be. Try using only hand signals—no words at all. You will most likely see your dog paying closer attention and responding with greater frequency and precision.

One last thing about verbal requests—strike the word "no" and any word that has been overused from your vocabulary. Dogs hear the word "no" so many times, they generally think their name is Lucy "no" or Max "no." Instead try an unpleasant sound, like the one used on a game show when a contestant gets the wrong answer (Family Feud comes to mind) or try saying "uh-uh" in a very dismissive way. If, for example, the dog tries to jump on you, step back and say "uh-uh" and give her your best "evil eye." As soon as she backs away or assumes a "sit" position, quickly pet her and say "good girl." If you have a treat handy, pop one in her mouth. You've now done a great job of communicating your expectations as well as reinforcing the right behavior.

So, don't stop talking to your dog. It's great to tell your dog how beautiful she is. Tell her about your day, ask her why the human world is so messed up and tell her how you can't imagine life without her. But, when you have something important to say, stop talking, and start communicating. Use nonverbal cues like facial expressions and body language, employ sounds or words that have more meaning and don't overuse them. Then, watch your dog sit up, pay closer attention and respond.

It's a beautiful thing to behold! 🐾

For additional information or comments you may contact Deborah Rosen through her website at www.goodcitizencanine.com.



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