

good deeds

Lost in Translation:

What we communicate to our dogs isn't necessary what we think we are saying.

Do you ever hug your dog and then wonder why he doesn't seem to enjoy it that much and tries to move away? Have you ever patted a dog on the head and noticed that he seems to flinch instead of looking happy to receive the attention? These are just two examples of the many things we do to our dogs that don't communicate effectively what we think we are telling them. You may think you are showing the dog affection, but your behavior is actually telling the dog that you are just lording yourself over him.

That pat on the head is interpreted by a dog as a show of dominance over him. Why would he enjoy that? Not only that, it isn't a pleasurable experience. Try it yourself sometime, ask someone to come up and pat you on the head exactly as if you were the family dog. Odds are you will not find the sensation all that pleasant. Far better to reach along the side of his head and scratch behind his ear...that he'll appreciate far more than the pat on the head. Just as you would appreciate a neck massage better than a clunk on the head, so does your dog.

Although our dogs are often smart enough to overlook what is rude behavior in their eyes, not all dogs are as willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Hugging is also interpreted as an aggressive action. To a dog, we are forcing our dominance over them when we hug them. Young children often want to run up and hug unfamiliar dogs. It is no wonder that children sometimes get bit. In the dog's eyes, it is just disciplining a rude child.

Dogs are very adept at picking up clues from our behavior, but even so, we are often giving them mixed signals. So it is no wonder some dogs get confused and behavior problems develop. When you add more family members into the mix, odds increase that more confusion can develop as commands can be given in different ways. Not only that, some people are more likely to be more permissive with the dog than others, and mixed signals abound. It is amazing that our dogs obey us as well as they do, as they must think we are pretty crazy sometimes.

If you notice your dog picking up bad habits, first ask yourself if there is something that you are doing to encourage it. If you can't figure out the problem, contact a dog trainer for advice and sign up for some dog obedience classes. It is money well spent. Contact a certified animal behaviorist for more difficult problems. Often times, they can give suggestions to get things back on track and keep your dog a valued family member that will remain with you until he takes his last breath.

Many dogs come into rescue because of behavior problems. The majority of these issues could have been resolved with the proper training and professional assistance. It pays to educate yourself about animal behavior so that you can more easily understand how your dog thinks. This will allow you to communicate more effectively with your dog. No matter what your age or level of experience there is always something more that you can learn on a subject. One book that is highly recommended by many dog trainers is The Other End of the Leash – Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs by Patricia McConnell PhD. Our dogs do an incredible job of filtering through all the mixed signals we humans are constantly sending them and loving us anyway. Reading this book will give you a new appreciation for the wonder that is the domestic canine and your own beloved family pet.

by Rita, Love-a-Bull MN Bulldog Rescue

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