

CHAPTER 2: Understanding Your Dog – he can't speak 'human'

"A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself"

Josh Billings

We have all heard people say "my dog understands every word I say". A dog can no more speak 'human' than we can speak 'dog'. A dog cannot understand the words you use, but can understand the sound and inflection of your voice; you cannot understand the "words" your dog uses, but you can understand the meaning of a growl, a happy yap or a danger-signal bark.

So let's be clear about this – the words you use to your dog are meaningless; you could be swearing like a trooper or reciting Shakespeare and he would be none the wiser, but if you used a sing-song voice while doing either of these, he would know you meant "good dog". Remember the scene in "3 Men and a Baby" when Tom Sellick is reading to the baby from the sports pages? His line was "it doesn't matter what you read; as long as you use the right voice."

During the basic obedience training, he will learn to associate a certain command word, accompanied by a hand signal, with an appropriate response action, but he cannot understand "human."

Helping your Dog Understand You

Your dog reads your messages through your tone of voice, your body language and signals that you have taught her. To fully understand how she will "read" your message, we need to discuss different aspects of the dog's physiology.

Senses

Sight: remember that dogs are primarily hunters and their sight has been designed for this purpose. A dog's vision is quite poor for stationary objects, but they are able to distinguish moving objects accurately. In fact, research has shown that a dog can identify their owner amongst a group of people from a distance of a mile! They have no eye for detail, but if it moves it might be good to eat, and so they chase it.

Dogs have large pupils to help them see in the dark and have a color vision similar to our red-green color-blindness. Different breeds have developed different vision capabilities; sight hounds, for example, have a peripheral vision of 270 degrees, compared to humans of 180 degrees.

Hand signals are used in training because the dog can see them, even when they are at some distance from you. They quickly learn to understand the body language involved in signals. You need to get his attention before using the hand signal, obviously, by saying his name or using a clicker.

I discovered when I was trialing dogs in Obedience competitions, during the "long sit and down" exercises, where the dog must remain on the sit or drop for a prescribed number of minutes with you in sight, that if I stood absolutely still my dogs would become restless. If I moved my hands and head a little, they were much calmer; this is because they could see me better when I moved.

Hearing: dogs can hear sounds beyond both ends of the spectrum of human hearing. The mobility of a dog's ear enables them to accurately pinpoint the location of the sound. Dogs can hear sounds that are four times the distance of a human's hearing range, which is why your dog might bark "at nothing"; she has heard something some distance away that you couldn't hear. Understanding about your dog's hearing also reminds you that you don't have to yell at a dog to make them hear you; yelling won't make them understand you any better either.

Smell: a dog can differentiate between odors that are 100 million times lower in concentration than those detected by the human nose. This is why they are so useful at tracking and detection work that involves drugs and explosives.

In the human world, dogs are overloaded with sensory input, but we expect them to go against their basic instincts and ignore it all. Put yourself in the dog's position – how would it feel?

Intelligence

The term, *intelligence*, refers to the faculties required for a range of tasks like solving problems, learning and communication. Dogs have an ability for social intelligence that is not shared with many animals, and they are able to learn through observation and simple reinforcement techniques.

Working dog puppies are often taught by following or watching experienced dogs as they go about their working tasks. They learn how to herd stock and pull sleds by copying their elders. This is possible because dogs are predisposed to learn and imitate the behavior of other dogs; it has also been shown that they can imitate human behavior. I have seen numerous handlers get down on all fours to demonstrate an exercise to their dog, and we have all heard the one about the guy who climbed through the new doggie door to show his dog how to use it.

Some dogs also have ability to perform certain tasks built-in as part of their make-up. We had a cattle dog cross, called Jaffa, when we lived on 200 acres; she was born with the ability to "bunch" animals into a tight group. When visitors came, we often stood on the front lawn chatting before going inside. Invariably, without the people being aware, Jaffa would circle us into an ever-tightening group until we realized what she was doing and all stepped back again. She knew how to work "animals" without having to be taught!

Does your Dog Understand You?

Dogs are a pack animal, having inherited a complicated social hierarchy from their wolf ancestors. There is a set of behaviors that determines each dog's position in the pack; this non-verbal communication is effected by means of postures and body language. This innate understanding of social structures and the ability to communicate them is the reason why dogs fit so well into human households, are trainable and able to enjoy the unique relationship they have with their human companions.

You need to be the pack leader to your dog, or he will fill that role. A dog that thinks it is the leader of the pack is not a pleasure to have around, as he has no respect for you because he considers you to be his inferior, and you need to be put in your place.

Once you have established your leadership role, your dog will respect it and you, and will be more easily trained. He needs to look to you for food, warmth, comfort and well-being. You own the food, the bed, the house, the yard and the toys. You always win the games, even though you both have fun. He follows your rules; he isn't allowed to make up his own rules. And as leader of the pack, you don't adapt your rules to suit him.

You may need to reinforce your role as the leader of the pack as the puppy grows through adolescence (shudder!) and into adulthood. Be consistent and patient and you will maintain your position of top dog. Never allow your dog to dictate the terms of your relationship – that is the role of the leader of the pack.

Do You Understand your Dog?

Your dog wants to learn and loves doing things with you; he wants to please you because you are the pack leader. You need to develop skills as the leader and the translator of your wishes to develop his enthusiasm for learning.

You may be really upset by some of your dog's behavior but it is unlikely that he will be. You don't want a pee-stained carpet in your living room, but he couldn't see that it was much different to grass – both are absorbent. Whether peeing on the carpet was due to distraction or need, he only did what was natural for him.

You don't have to accept peeing on the carpet, jumping up on visitors or pulling the washing from the line, but you do need to understand the motivation behind these behaviors. A dog doesn't have emotions like spite, guilt or revenge, and his actions are not motivated by this type of feeling. Getting angry, hitting the dog, banishing him outside or withholding food has no effect, other than to confuse and bewilder the dog. Through training, you will reinforce good behavior and eliminate behaviors that don't fit with your lifestyle.

The Brains behind your Dog

Dogs are single-minded animals and they are also simple-minded, but they are not stupid. They can only concentrate on one thing at any one time. This explains why, when your gundog has found an interesting scent, she doesn't respond when you call her – she simply didn't hear you. I have more examples of this than I care to remember. Because of this single-mindedness, you can be certain that if your pet is looking at the kitchen counter she is thinking about getting up to see what food may be there for the taking. Being aware of this trait, and watching your dog's actions, can often help you stop bad behavior before it is actually carried out.

A dog has no understanding of things that happened in the past. They live only in the present and don't relate to the mess on the floor that they made five minutes before. In comes you, and you start yelling – he has no idea what you are yelling about, even if you drag him to the mess and show him (or worse still, rub his nose in it – this only serves to make him think that you are pretty disgusting)

The dog cannot associate your temper, now, with the mess he made earlier and has now simply forgotten about. You might think he is looking guilty, but you are misinterpreting his submissive attitude to your yelling. Unless you catch the dog red-handed, in the act of the bad behavior, anything you do is unrelated to the incident in the mind of the dog. If you do catch him in the act, yelling won't help; give a firm "no", said with a growl in your voice, remove the dog to the appropriate place for that sort of thing, and praise him.

Dogs are social creatures; they want and need social interaction and touch. Much of a dog's behavior is motivated by this need. You can learn much about your own dog by watching him on his own and with other family members.

The Dominant Dog

These dogs consider that they are the pack leader, which puts you down the line from them. Test this by asking your dog to sit by your side and look where his paws are positioned. If one or both of his paws are in front of your feet, he thinks that he is in charge of your pack. Gently move his foot to be level with yours, and keep doing this until he gets the message. Repeat this exercise often to remind him that you are top dog.

Dogs who think they are the boss can suffer separation anxiety, push through doorways before you, bark at visitors, pull on their lead when walking, not let you move freely around the house, interrupt your meals, bark a lot and generally try to assert themselves constantly.

If you have a dominant dog, assert your dominance over her often. Make sure she waits for you to go through doors and gates first – the command "wait" is good for these situations.