The Happy Dog Training Academy

How Dogs Read us Humans

How our dogs Read us.

How Dogs Interpret Human Body Language

Do Dogs Ever Bite for No Reason? I have spoken many times about our dog’s body language and the importance of knowing how to interpret it. I have also mentioned the importance of body language when training. But on this occasion, I want to talk about the importance of our body language, so as not to antagonize a fearful or aggressive dog. Here I would like to focus on the way our posture can be seen in our canine friends, and the way the dog interprets out body language. People often make mistakes in the way they use their body language when interacting with dogs. Sometimes those mistakes can lead to a person being nipped, or even seriously bitten. Even people who consider themselves to be dog people and trainers, can approach a dog in the wrong way. Knowing how a dog is likely to see your body language can help dealing with strange dogs, it can also help in their training, by creating a more relaxed environment. Some people just seam to know instinctively how to display good body language around dogs. A lot of these people it would seem are people who have grown up with them. More people than you would imagine have no idea. If they don’t, they need to learn. A person whose body language is intimidating, and this is usually unintentional. Intimidating or erratic body language is often misunderstood, between what is being communicated and what is actually wanted. The message that you send a dog has to be clear and consistent, and body language should never appear threatening. The key is to make sure that the dog is relaxed and calm. This applies equally to training your own dog or simply trying to form a social relationship with someone else’s dog. If you’re sending clear, appropriate messages, you’ll be far less likely to end up bitten than someone who is not giving the right signals, the effect that their body language sends can be quite threatening or intimidating. Good trainers and perceptive dog lovers are hardly ever bitten.

There are at least five common essential things that you should keep in mind when using body language to communicate with a dog. With each, you should proceed with the very basic premise that you at least want to make sure that your body language sends only the message that you want the dog to receive. Remember, that humans and dogs communicate differently. What might be seen as inviting body language by another human could be viewed very differently by a dog.

**Eye Contact**

Humans, generally speaking, enjoy eye contact, and in fact, we tend to mistrust people who refuse to make eye contact. Then of course there’s the period after we’ve just fallen in love, when it seems as though there’s nothing better than gazing into our loved one’s eyes, almost as if we’re trying to see into their soul. Most of us, however, don’t like prolonged eye contact in a non-romantic context. For most people when talking, 15 seconds is not unthinkable, and for some even longer periods, would not be a problem.

For dogs, especially when dealing with someone they’ve just met, 15 seconds is unthinkable. It’s an eternity. More than a few seconds anything above 5 in fact, is likely to be seen as disrespectful, at best and threatening at worst. So, if you’re approaching a dog you don’t know, direct eye contact is a bad idea. If the dog seems nervous, don’t make eye contact at all instead, look over his head or off to the side. If he seems to be at ease, then you can make eye contact briefly, and then look away, this is known as “the soft eye contact.” It’s useful to train your dog to accept eye contact from other people, simply put very few people know that dogs don’t view eye contact the same way that humans do. A well-trained, properly socialized dog needs to know that humans are sometimes going to behave very badly and are going to make eye contact with them. As it is the case with many training endeavours, what you need to do is teach the dog that when eye contact is made, good things will happen.

Begin with your dog seated in front of you. Have a treat in your hand and show your dog the treat. Then raise the treat so that it’s level with your eye and tell your dog “Watch me”. When the dog makes eye contact with you, tell him he’s a good boy, and give him the treat. Repeat these many times.

Now, change it up. Tell your dog “Watch me,” but don’t move the treat up to eye level. Does he make eye contact anyway? If he does, give him the treat. If he doesn’t, then say “Watch,” and move the treat about halfway to your eye.

Stop, and wait. Chances are the dog will look up at your eyes, anticipating what might happen next. As soon as eye contact is made, give him the treat. If he never makes eye contact, go back to the first step, and start the whole procedure over again.

To make sure that your dog is really okay with eye contact from other people, you’re going to want to have him do this exercise with other people. Recruit family members and friends that he’s already comfortable with. Then introduce people that he doesn’t know all that well. What you’re teaching him is that eye contact is never going to result in anything bad, and in fact, it can be a pretty good thing. Basically, you’re overcoming nature using nurture.

A dog who tolerates eye contact well is less likely to react badly to people who don’t know “the rules.” And as a responsible dog owner, you need to know that your dog will inevitably encounter such people. You don’t want anyone to get bitten, or even to feel uncomfortable around your dog, so working on eye contact is important, you’re teaching your dog how to “speak human” when it comes to using body language.

**Do Dogs Understand Language?**

Tips for Reading Canine Body Language

How Do Dogs Think and Feel, and more importantly, Do Dogs Reason?

What does your hands Say?

Think about what you do when you meet someone new. I don’t think that I’m any different from anyone else in this regard, I offer my hand, I expect that the person I’m meeting will also extend their hand, we’ll shake.

People who understand dogs know that they have to use their hands carefully. People who don’t understand dogs will often reach out, palm down, to offer a pat on the head to a dog they don’t know, not realizing that the dog may very well perceive that as a sign of aggression. There are breeds like the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Boxer, Poodle, and some smaller breeds, that don’t tolerate being patted on the head. We have probably all encountered the dog, that moves it’s head up to meet the hand when a pat on the head is offered, invariably it is these dogs that are intolerable of patting. A better approach is to extend the hand, palm down, and let the dog get a good sniff. Then pet gently under the chin. As the dog becomes more and more relaxed, move to scratching behind the ears, most dogs love this. When the dog gets to know you better, he will probably tolerate, a pat on the head, but it’s not a good first move.

If a dog is fearful of hands, there could be a very good reason, if a dog has been abused, they see hands as instruments of pain and punishment. In that case, it’s usually better not to offer a hand at all. Just let the dog approach you, stand still and keep your hands down, behind your back or in your pockets. Don’t offer any more intimacy than he’s prepared to tolerate, and if at any point he backs away, respect that and don’t continue trying by moving forward. It may take some time before the dog will feel confident to approach you. People who don’t understand body language, will often walk forward offering a hand, saying “It’s alright I won’t hurt you”, this we call humanising and dog’s that don’t speak English wont understand, they will see this as a threat and will worn, but may bite, if the person gets within striking distance.

Dogs are also naturally wary of flamboyant hand gestures, which is why small children frequently end up being bitten. If you have kids, teach them to adopt a relaxed posture around dogs, and avoid waving their hands about it’s too much body language. For that matter, teach them to keep the verbal language quiet as well. Simply stated, too much “hand language” may be perceived by a dog as rude, or even threatening. So, keep it calm and cool be polite.

**Body Position**

Now, going back to the handshake, when I’m meeting someone and offering my hand, I don’t stand sideways, that would look pretty weird, right? So, I’m facing the person I’m meeting, and standing tall. This is the last thing a dog wants. In addition to direct eye contact, a front-to-front position seems threatening to a dog. So, if you’re meeting a new dog friend, move toward him with your body positioned a bit sideways, avert your eyes, but do not bend down or lower your head. Both are signs of cowering; the dog will see this as you as a submissive person and there for will try to dominate you. Keeping a normal posture, the best advice I give to people is to act as though the dog is not there. Until they come to me.

One thing that dogs do have very much in common with humans. When it comes to body positioning, is that on first acquaintance, they’d prefer to have you keep your distance. Dogs know the concept of personal space. In our culture, and that of the canine, keeping new people that we’re not in a relationship, with at arm’s length is where they feel most comfortable. And I do mean literally.

So, when it comes to strange dogs, most of us would be well advised to keep a respectful distance, and to position our body sideways. A sideways position makes you look smaller, and therefore less threatening. Once you get to know the dog better, if he wants to run toward you and deliver a full-contact greeting, that’s another thing, maybe an indication of poor training on the part of the owner, but certainly not going to get you bitten. Even when you do know the dog, you should still maintain a certain level of respect. Be careful with head patting, and don’t hug. I will talk more about hugging in the next section.

**Body Movements**

Dogs are extremely sensitive to the way that we move our bodies. If you move quickly or erratically, you could make a dog very nervous. Combine fast, unpredictable movements with too much eye contact and disrespectful use of your hands, and you could end up being bitten. It is probably the reason most children get bitten, due to their unpredictable, erratic movements. So, keep it slow. If the dog is very nervous, it might be best not to move at all.

Now, about hugging. Imagine that you’re out for a walk, and someone you’ve never met before rushes up to you and gives you a great big hug. What are you going to do? Most likely you’re going to shout something like “Get the hell off me!” and push them away. This is another area where dogs and humans are likely to react similarly with fear. Dogs have only 3 defence’s we call then the three “Fs”. These are Fight, Flight, Fear, We humans can also react with mistrust, and maybe even anger. The difference is that a dog can’t verbalize his displeasure, and he’s most likely going to be too small compared with a human, So, his reaction will be to use the only defences he knows, dogs in a lot of cases will give a warning, showing teeth or a low growl snarling and possibly snapping. Even with humans they know, dogs may not be overly receptive to hugs. I’ve had dogs that were perfectly happy to get up in my lap and have me wrap my arms around them and hug the living daylights out of them. I’ve also had dogs that tolerated hugging because they loved me, but I always kept the hugs gentle and non-restraining. Then, of course, there are dogs who simply won’t tolerate hugs under any circumstances.

It’s in our nature, though, to want to hug our dogs. Just make sure that you know how the dog feels about it. If he leans into you and seems relaxed, and has no trouble making eye contact with you, then you probably have a dog who enjoys being hugged. On the other hand, if he tenses up or looks away from you, hugging him might not be one of your better ideas.

If you’re determined to make your dog, accept hugs, then you’re going to have to do some conditioning. In other words, as is the case with eye contact, you need to teach your dog that hugging will make good things happen. So, put your dog in a sit, next to you, and hold some treats in the hand that is on the opposite side, if you have the dog on your right, have the treats in your left hand, and vice versa. Touch your dog’s shoulders with the hand that is not holding the treat, and then give him the treat that’s in the other hand. Stop touching as soon as you give the treat. Touch and feed, touch, and feed.

In little time, your dog should begin looking for the treat as soon as you touch him. Gradually increase the length of time that you are touching your dog. Very slowly, increase the length of time that you are touching your dog, and move into an actual hug. If at any time he seems to be uncomfortable, stop. If he begins to resist, the best course of action would be simply to declare the exercise a failure and accept that you have a dog who does not like hugging. I know this can be frustrating you love your dog, and you want so very much to be able to hug him, but you may just need to find other ways to express your affection. Now, when it comes to strange dogs, the rules are pretty simple just don’t hug. And if you have kids, don’t let them hug either.

**Overall Demeanour, if you’re working with dogs, Trainer/Kennel Staff/Veterinary Staff.**

It’s not always easy adjusting our body language to suit dogs. When you’re trying to not make eye contact, be careful about how you use your hands, do not face front, and so on, you can just end up looking peculiar, and this in and of itself can make a dog nervous. After all, a strange dog doesn’t know you, and you might be coming off as a very strange human specimen.

If you think this might be the case, work with your own dog. Maybe even take a video so you can see how you’re using your body language. Get good at looking relaxed and confident, and making the right movements. Then, ask friends if you can practice with their dogs. Once you think you’re ready to deal effectively with strange dogs, remember that you should always first ask the owner before approaching and ask about the temperament of their dog, and assume that if they say no, they have a good reason.

**The Final Word**

Often, the body language that pleases us in humans is going to be very displeasing to dogs, although there are some commonalities in human and canine body language. Humans need to be educated in the right ways to approach dogs. That said, there are always going to be people who will get it wrong, they don’t mean any harm, they just don’t understand how dogs perceive human body language. So, be careful when approaching strange dogs, make sure you know the proper body language to use. And when it comes to your own dogs, work with them on issues like eye contact and physical interaction. You want them to know that even behaviours that they don’t especially appreciate can still result in good things happening. Working with your dog, forming an unbreakable bond. Dogs have one great attribute we humans lack in a lot of cases, open honesty and dog will never lie or take your for granted, it just not in the packs best interest. The one thing that matters to the canine is the pack, everything revolves around it. The canine performs duties from the leader down to the smallest puppy. Your pet will see your family as their pack, of course dogs don’t see us as dogs, that is a human attribute. They see us as providers, care givers and protectors. We have to hold up to these and above all not let them down. It is one reason The Happy Dog Training Academy, was set up to give every dog the chance to have a happy loving family.