



Doggie Disconnect

When and why human vs canine communication fails

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Humans and dogs have been co-evolving for more than 15,000 years. This coexistence has created a relationship that enables non-verbal and verbal communication to exist like in no other human/animal relationship. Alerting your clients to the canine human communication system and its inherent failures can help alleviate potential problems.

Communication

Communication is about the sending and receiving of information. It is impossible *not to* communicate. Remaining silent is communication; standing still is communication. We are constantly sending and receiving signals whether we are consciously aware of them or not.

Communication as defined by Merriam Webster: 1a: a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior exchange of information 2a: information communicated: information transmitted or conveyed.¹

Therein lies the problem. "A common system of symbols, signs, or behavior exchange of information" between two species is not always reliable. The dog certainly gets the blue ribbon for advancing further in his communication skills toward humans than the human has done toward the dog.

Miscommunication

Problems and conflict arise when the sender and receiver do not interpret the message as intended. The sender may think he sent a specific message only for it to be interpreted differently (i.e., misinterpreted) by the receiver. Either the sender or the receiver can be at fault but with dogs, since they are direct and straightforward communicators, it is up to us to be clear, concise, and conscious of our signals. Communication is like a relationship; it takes two: a sender and a receiver.

Types of Communication; Verbal vs. Non-Verbal

In a famous study, Professor Albert Mehrabian developed a rule that communication is:

- 7-percent verbal
- 93-percent nonverbal

The nonverbal is broken down into two parts:

- 38-percent is paralinguistic (the way that the words are said)
- 55-percent is in facial expression and overall body language²

Although there has been conflicting research on these percentages since this 1971 study, the majority of our communication is still considered nonverbal. The dog relies more on reading and assessing our nonverbal signals whereas the human focuses more on the verbal. This different focus between the two species creates the potential for miscommunication and conflict within the relationship.



Non-Verbal³

The old adages, “it’s not what you say but what you don’t say” or “It’s not what you say but how you say it” comes to mind. The following is a checklist that comprises the elements of nonverbal communication.

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Posture and body orientation
- Body Language
- Space and Distance
- Proximity
- Para-linguistic
- Humor
- Touch
- Silence
- Appearance
- Symbol
- Visual Communication

Human-Dog Communication

The dog’s epic accomplishment in co-evolving with humans during thousands of years was, in part, due to both species learning to communicate with each other offering a greater chance of survival for both. This skill set has aided in their evolution and domestication. Although the dog has become a master at assessing the human’s non-verbal communication; unfortunately, the human has not mastered the dog’s. We often and universally fall sort in reading the canines nonverbal cues, resulting in the dog’s misbehavior, conflict within the human/

dog relationship, and/or occasional abuse. More often than not, the dog is the one who bears the negative consequences of this human lack of understanding resulting in rehoming, relinquishment, or euthanasia.

Although we have similar sensory input channels (i.e., sight, scent, sound, touch, taste) there is yet another difference between the two species; the human relies on visual and verbal information whereas the dog relies on the olfactory and nonverbal.

The dog assesses, analyses, and responds to all parts of the human body. They are especially attuned to our posture, hands, face, eyes, and tone of voice, all of which assist them in assessing our emotional state. Relaxed verses tense, calm verses stressed, insecure verses secure, confident verses hesitant, hard verses soft spoken, quick verses slow are all telling signals for the dog. As professionals, it is easy to forget some of our clients are not as aware or understand the significance of canine body language and how well our dogs read us.

When Human v. Canine Communication differs

Our cross-species communications are bar none to any other but there are some inherent differences that can lead to conflict.

When Humans Misread Canine Non-Verbal Signals

In a past consult, the client was a sweet older lady who expressed being afraid of her dog. He would spend a great deal of energy barking at her and causing her distress. However, during the evaluation, it was apparent the dog was only “talking” to her—he was bored mindless. Because she was misinterpreting this as aggressive, she was considering rehoming or euthanasia. He

◀ Dogs, like humans, exhibit left-eye gaze bias, meaning they look at the other person’s right side of his/her face. No other animal has been known to display that behavior.

was taking the full brunt of her inability to correctly assess his communication. Teaching canine communication and awareness is paramount in assisting your clients, whether it is puppy classes, obedience training, rehabilitations, or solving behavior problems.

We have all heard the following:

- “Fido is a good dog until he’s not.”
- “It happened so fast; we did not see it coming.”
- “It just came out of the blue.”
- “Everything was just fine until all heck broke loose.”
- “We were just sitting there and the next thing we knew....”

Granted, we are all busy living our lives and can’t be on alert 24/7, but perhaps in each of these cases, the dogs were already giving subtle warnings. That’s the key: a problem may arise lightening quick but if there has been sufficient time or awareness perhaps these “out of the blue” incidents could have been avoided or prevented.

Examples of When the Dog Misinterprets the Human’s Message

The following are statements due to differences in the meaning of a signal sent by a human and misinterpreted by the dog. The message was not received by the dog as intended by the sender.

- “I just put my hand down to pat him.” (and was bitten)
- “But...his tail was wagging.” (before the attack)
- “Hollering at him to hush at the doorbell (just makes him louder).”
- “She was just hugging him.” (before the snap to the face)
- “I bent down to remove him by the collar (and was bitten).”
- “We were walking on the sidewalk and as another dog approached to say hello, the two exploded.” This has to deal with the fact that dogs in their natural habitat approach at an angle or arch and not straightforward or head on as our sidewalks dictate.
- “When I go to get him, he runs away.” We have all witnessed a dog being chased by the owner hollering, “Come! Come!” For the human, the natural signal to come is for the human to lean or walk toward the dog. But in the dog’s language you have to lean back or walk away. Conversely if you want him to stop or retreat, leaning forward or walking towards should send the desired signal.
- The Hello and Goodbyes with an anxious dog. Another example where human nature is in direct conflict with human/dog communication is the coddling of an anxious dog. It is in our nature to want to soothe. However, this can create a vicious cycle; instead, reassurance can have the opposite affect making the dog even more anxious. What works with a human child does not necessarily translate with the intended purpose to the dog. Coddling, cooing, or baby-talking to an anxious dog may not boost his confidence.

Being calm and matter of fact is more reassuring, along with teaching independent life skills, is the protocol in dealing with an anxious dog.

For some specific behaviors, what would be natural for a human may create conflict for a dog; this is a counter-intuitive communication. Teach your clients to be aware that what’s natural for a human may not result in the desired natural response from the dog.

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Examples of when the human misinterprets the dog’s message:

- “He always turns his head when I look at him.”
- “He won’t look me in the eye”.
- “He knew he did wrong because he looked so guilty!” When cleaning up a mess, be it a potty accident, the garbage, or a devoured shoe the dog’s nonverbal response may be perceived by us as guilt but the research (for now) says he is responding to our negative verbal and nonverbal signals. Fido may or may not be “feeling guilty” but he surely is responding to your negative reaction. Nothing needs to be said for him to realize that you are displeased.
- “He is constantly trying to get my attention or is always getting into things; does he need medication?” I was called to consult with a dog that was on 100 mg Trazodone; he was on a slippery slope to being rehomed. Upon arrival I saw a healthy, happy, exuberant, large puppy that just did not know what to do with himself. The human expectation and interpretation of behavior was in conflict. It was a simple fix to alter their perceptions and realize his behavior was normal and a training and exercise protocol was implemented.

Educating your clients regarding these common miscommunications and misunderstandings can help your client avoid many frustrating situations and increase the likelihood of successful training.

Dogs Can Discern Emotional Expression of the Human Face

The social skills acquired for recognizing human facial expressions has been instrumental in the survival and adaptation for the dog living with humans. It is not uncommon to observe a client “give a command” with a hard-facial glare. By suggesting them to “request a behavior” with a soft facial expression you can see *both* the human and dog’s body relax into a more natural body posture.

A study published in 2015 proved that theory. Corsin Müller and colleagues at the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, conducted the study to see if dogs are able to interpret human facial expressions rather than other cues and how that affects the dogs behavior in reading those emotions. The dogs were taught to nose-touch a screen to receive a treat. The dogs had choices between a human’s happy or angry face on the screen. “The dogs’ performances were affected by whether they saw happy or angry expressions,” the study revealed. “The dogs took longer to approach the angry expression (nose-touching the image for a treat) than the dogs who saw the happy expression.”

The researchers suggested the dogs “had to overcome their natural tendency to move away from aversive (or threatening) stimuli.”⁴ The study concluded dogs read our non-verbal signs to determine if we are sad, happy, pleased, or angry.

Being aware of the dog’s reluctance to approach or avoid is one of many ways you can teach your client to assess how their dog perceives human emotions. Conversely, we can teach our clients to be more aware of the messages their dog is sending. Another way to help your clients discern their dog’s emotions is teaching them Calming Signals. Although known among professionals, these cues are not commonly known among pet parents. These nonverbal signals are subtle but teaching these can greatly increase the ability to accurately assess their dog. Some easy ones to spot are the tongue lick, lifting a paw, yawning, turning the head, looking away, or making the body smaller. (For more about Calming Signals training, see Peggy Swager’s article in the FALL issue of *Chronicle of the Dog*).

When Dogs are Reinforced for Voluntary Eye Contact

We can teach our clients to utilize the dog’s mastery of human nonverbal communication to their advantage. I call it the “lifeline,” a very powerful and, at times, lifesaving non-verbal communication skill. When we ask why a person selected a certain dog over others, it is not uncommon to hear: “he looked so cute,” “he looked so sad,” “he looked at me,” “we connected.” The old adage that “the eyes are the mirror of the soul,” is also the way into the human heart. We are aware of the Oxytocin studies and the bonding that is created through eye contact. But it also creates a “lifeline.” The human is searching for and looking



for an emotional connection. Not all dogs, especially those that have found themselves in a shelter environment, are prone to voluntary eye contact. It could be due to inherent shyness, lack of socialization, or an aversive past experience; regardless, we all know the power of “the look.” Think of how many dogs that could increase their chances for adoption if they had been reinforced for something as simple, but powerful, as establishing voluntarily eye contact?

A quick and easy exercise is teaching shelter workers or volunteers to “capture” eye contact and then immediately give a reward. Rewarding with the food bowl twice a day is a quick an efficient way to capture and reward voluntary eye contact as all dogs in the shelter will get the benefit of this exercise... twice a day. It would be interesting to learn if there is an increased rate of adoption after this exercise has been implemented. Eye contact can lead to getting the dog’s attention, which leads to focus, which leads to impulse control, that leads to the dog “learning to learn” -- creating a pyramid for training. Watching a dog figure this out and be rewarded is an exciting phenomenon. The dog now understands the need to watch, pay attention, and to focus. Establishing eye contact is something dogs do naturally but through reinforcement an initial bond can begin, creating the foundation for a growing relationship and future training.

Frequency, intensity, and duration of eye contact between pet parent and their dog should be one of the first behaviors you observe. You can almost correlate behavior or relationship problems with the above information. Little to no voluntary eye contact by the dog is a red flag for multiple problems. Some

◀ Humans often connect to a dog based on eye contact.

parents not only miss offered eye contact (by simply not paying attention) but most do not even realize that this critical component of communication for training and relationship building is missing. They just know that there are behavior problems.

Left Gaze Bias

Left gaze bias occurs when we look at faces, not inanimate object or animals. Humans tend to look to their left (the others person’s right side) of the face. “Researchers at the University of Lincoln have now shown that pet dogs also exhibit ‘left gaze bias,’ but only when looking at human faces. No other animal has been known to display this behavior before.”

Dr. Kun Guo suggests that “over thousands of generations of association with humans, dogs may have evolved the left gaze bias as a way to gauge our emotions,” *New Scientist* magazine reported. “Recent studies show that the right side of our faces can express emotions more accurately and more intensely than the left, including anger. If true, then it makes sense for dogs, and humans, to inspect the right-hand side of a face first.”⁶ The scientists believe that because the right side of a dog’s brain, which processes information from the left visual field, is better adapted to interpreting human facial emotion more than the left side.⁷

Summary

Even non-communication is communication

Communication is the sending and receiving of signals or information, be it non-verbal or verbal. Educating and making your client(s) aware of the inherent species differences can circumvent many misunderstandings and miscommunications. Dogs send and receive information in a direct manner. They are rarely coy or manipulative. They are honest and straightforward communicators; “what you see is what you get.” If we understand their language and “listen with our eyes,” they will tell us—their message will be clear.

Teaching your client that the dog is more aware of assessing the human, rather than the other way around, is paramount for an open and positive communication. There are numerous resources regarding canine body language via books, YouTube, DVDs, and charts that you can compile and utilize as part of your trainer’s toolbox. Just make sure you and your client are communicating on the same page, i.e., they understand their dog’s body language!

Because humans and dogs have been coevolving for so long, they have developed a sophisticated level of verbal and nonverbal interchange. This advanced interspecies communication has made it possible for deep emotional bonds to develop like no other human/animal relationship known to man.



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where her main focus is performing temperament assessments and behavior evaluations of dogs who are exhibiting mental health issues. For further information please go to her website at <http://www.lovingdogs.net>.

Resources

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