

Simple changes, big impact



I had been warned that the young reindeers would not approach any people, but simple changes to my body language made all the difference. The onlooking zoo staff were amazed when the reindeer chose to come close.

By learning and understanding what dogs are trying to communicate in various situations we are able to recognise the impact we have on them. Once we accept this, we are in a position to change things, making life easier for our own dogs as well as others we meet. We are less threatening to most animals if we change our body language appropriately in response to theirs.

Understanding the dog by putting ourselves in their position is the best thing we can do for them in the early stages of making changes.

I am proposing that we use some good “dog friendly” manners such as resisting the temptation to reach our hands out and touch them the moment we get close, avoiding eye contact and not talking to them as this invariably involves eye contact.

If they feel comfortable they will come and sniff you, so, just allow them to do this in their own time and then move away politely. Some dogs, providing they are not especially sound sensitive, may tolerate you talking quietly and gently to them (but not at them). We don’t have to stroke all dogs at the first opportunity. It is hard to deny ourselves this pleasure but we can do it if we try. When someone reaches their hand out to a dog you often see him back away, lowering his head to avoid the outstretched hand and turning away, yawning or giving another low level communication signal perhaps making some attempt to leave the vicinity.

On the other hand, the dog may respond by becoming wriggly and over excited, and may possibly jump up. Some people may tell him off whilst others encourage it. How confusing must that be for the dog?

The bouncy response doesn’t mean he enjoys human touch, it is usually a coping strategy where the dog is indicating that, actually, he is worried by the human.

Dogs rarely touch one another unless they know each other very well. In their terms, touch can be a form of confrontation, conflict, or a sexual approach. When they sniff another dog, it is a different form of making contact, usually achieved by nose to rear end, in a non invasive, “fact finding” manner and providing it doesn’t go on too long, is generally regarded as an acceptable form of address between dogs.

We need to recognise that humans are more tactile than dogs and should keep our behaviour for our own kind.

Many children like to be cuddled by familiar adults, but strangers are a totally different matter, for children and adults as well.

What would the parents' responses be if strangers were to walk up to their children daring to touch them?

Have you tried ruffling up someone's hair when they are concentrating on something? How do they react? This often happens to dogs. Can you see how tolerant dogs really are? I am sorry to say we humans invade dogs space far too often. Once this is realised this though, we can be aware of our impact on all the dogs we encounter and treat them more respectfully.



Boys enjoying time at a country fete. Somehow I don't think the boys or their parents would take kindly to strangers approaching, patting them on the head, stroking them or staring. (In fact, don't we tell our children not to stare?)

If people they don't know come up and touch them, children may start to react, perhaps running away or protesting. They may develop a fear of strangers, as many dogs do, for the same reasons.

Most dogs, depending on previous experiences, may become accustomed to their owners touching or holding them (not that they necessarily like it), but it is not fair to expect any dog to endure this behaviour from anyone else, so perhaps try to protect your dog and educate other people. Some dogs may like being stroked, but the majority of people are unable to detect the differences between a dog showing signs of enjoyment, tolerance (feeling he has no option other than to endure being stroked) or insecurity.

This is why it is of paramount importance that everyone who comes into contact with dogs should be aware of how they communicate and what they are telling us.

1. Being with your dog, having a shared relationship and using relaxed, open body language reduces the need for commands and demands. Working reasonably close and side on to the dog, at the same time respecting their personal space, encourages the dog to want to be with you. The dog is comfortable and responsive to the positive moves of your subtle body language.



1

2. Here Hagrid turns in my direction, without the need for me to tell him. Put simply, a long line applied correctly as a boundary, time, patience, mutual respect, a good relationship and inviting body language and you have the tools needed for this natural way of working with dogs.



2

3. By staying close to Hagrid, with a loose lead, slightly turning in the direction we are going, gives Hagrid the time to digest the information before coming with me. As he sniffs I wait for him. A long line gives you a connection with your dog and is a valuable tool that helps to build trust and confidence.



3

4. Hagrid and I move along together, choosing to be with one another. When Hagrid came to me 2 years ago he didn't trust people. He pulled, always at the end of an 8 metre line, never looking round to connect with the person at the other end. A long line offers reassurance to the dog and is a positive, necessary tool, which helps the dog to feel secure in knowing the owner is close by. It also plays a part in developing the relationship between dog and owner, providing the owner respects communication signals given by the dog. Off lead dogs are susceptible to unwanted approaches from other dogs, can chase wildlife, have opportunities to learn how to bully or are vulnerable to being bullied themselves, which undermines confidence. If a long line is used, you remove potential negative pressure from the dog / owner relationship which an unreliable recall can cause. At appropriate times and places, being off lead is good for a dog but, even if the handler is fluent at identifying canine communication, being at a distance makes it difficult to spot what is going on with dog-to-dog meetings and to respond effectively to potential problems.



4

First impressions

This sequence of pictures indicates how our actions affect dogs:



My hand is on Hagrid's chest. He is fairly comfortable with this and his body leaning into me. His mouth is relaxed.

1



I continue to reach towards his ear. He transfers his weight to his other side, moving further away from me, lifting a paw slightly, ears drawn back and jaw tense as he keeps an eye on me, indicating how unhappy he is with what my hands are doing.

3



As I move my hand to touch his ear he becomes uncomfortable and leans his body slightly away from me whilst turning his head away. His mouth closes.

2



As I return my hand to his chest his weight begins to turn into my body again, his head comes closer to mine, although his mouth remains closed. He looks right into my face so I respond by giving him a soft expression, close my eyes a little (careful not to intently look at him; which is threatening for dogs) and tilt my head slightly away therefore making the situation easier.

4

This was the first time I had met Hagrid, so examining his ear was quite intrusive for him. He was responsive to where my hands were and what they were doing.

Key points | Simple changes, big impact



Understanding the dog by putting ourselves into their position is the best thing we can do for them in the early stages of making changes.



We need to recognise that humans are more tactile than dogs and should keep our behaviour for our own kind. Dogs are especially reluctant to receive advances from strangers, so we must speak for them, educating people in how to act politely towards them by avoiding direct eye contact, touch and verbal communication if they don't know the dog.



A bouncy response doesn't mean the dog enjoys human touch, it is usually a coping strategy where the dog is indicating that, actually, he is worried by the human.