

Can't We All Just Get Along?

By Laura Tyler

Why doesn't my dog like me? This question is one that comes up from time to time when someone calls for help with their dog. And when families are in conflict with how to raise or train their canine buddy it can become a serious issue. It's interesting to think that a dog we bring into our home would prefer one family member over another? Why is that?

Dogs respond well to humans who are consistent, trustworthy and fair; sometimes choosing to stay close to one who offers something the dog wants or likes. If we review the simple laws of learning we note that animals will usually do what's in their own best interest. They will give up on what doesn't work or something that causes discomfort.

Another thing to consider is how our actions are interpreted in the language of dogs. Since dogs are primarily visual communicators, how we "act" around them can influence how they respond. A prime example might be seen in what happens when a very friendly, expressive human meeting a very shy dog for the first time. This type of greeting can easily overwhelm that type of dog. This particular human's body language can cause this dog to become defensive and frightened, even though the human means no harm. Being primate rather than canine, we use our hands a lot. We touch, pat, rub, squeeze, hug and make direct eye contact with each other. These communication signals are important to us. Humans talk with our eyes, hands, mouths and body language.

Normal dogs' circle each other, sometimes offer vocalizations, defer eye contact, require personal space and NEVER hug each other or pat each other on the top of the head. They might lick each others' face or lips, share ground sniffing or catch the scent of the other dog and begin to move parallel to that animal. In making this comparison with human behavior we can begin to see the difference. The tolerance for this miscommunication between humans and dogs varies quite a bit. When that tolerance is less or nonexistent, things can escalate to trouble in an instant. If it's present in a family situation then one member of the family can take the brunt of this dysfunctional relationship and the two need help to make peace and change communication.

It falls to us as the higher intellect human being to educate ourselves in the science of animal learning and the body language of dogs. We have come a long way in research and studies explaining some typical canine body language. Understanding this language gives us a heads up on what we can expect from our dogs and how to interpret what they are attempting to communicate to us. It also teaches us how to behave in order to build that communication.

The bottom line is that it's not what we can "make" the dog do; it's about establishing trust and respect. It's our job to be the guide for this animal living in a human habitat. It's takes our effort to teach with clarity, consistency and compassion.

If you think your dog doesn't "like" you, seek out the help of a qualified behavior specialist and be ready to take your relationship to a whole new level through training, and understanding how dogs learn.

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