

## Do you listen to your dog?

By Chris Puls



You know how frustrating it is when you are trying to communicate something to a person or your dog and they aren't listening. Imagine what your day to day life would be like if your basic needs were met, but NO ONE understood what you were trying to say!

A conversation on a talk group recently got me thinking about this. It started as a conversation about teaching dogs to communicate with humans using "doggie sign language". This I learned can include behaviors specifically taught for

the purpose of helping the dog communicate a need or want, but is mostly about learning to "read dog" and listen to what the dog is trying to say naturally, using their own language. I thought to myself, well I already do that and I'm sure most of the people I know do too. But based on some of the responses, I realized that maybe that wasn't the case.

On the list, Jenny shared this:

*I remember years ago, seeing a dog desperately asking his owner to "throw the ball again, please". He was picking up the ball, and dropping it again at his master's feet. Eventually the man said in exasperation -- "What a dumb dog! Doesn't he realize that I am not going to throw the ball?" To which I replied, "He probably thinks what a dumb man. Doesn't he realize that I'm asking him to throw the ball again, please?"*

*To me the funny thing was that the man then said, "Oh, I'd never thought of it that way!"*

Another person on the list asked everyone to list the "signs" their dog uses to communicate something to them. Here is what one of my dogs communicates to me on a fairly regular basis:

- If a toy is "stuck" somewhere, he runs between me and the stuck toy (if it's in another room or outside). While he's within my view, he pauses and stares at me, then he races off and then races back and repeats it till I ask "Is your toy stuck?" and he wags his tail "yes!" and takes off with me following.
- If I'm in the living room and he has shoved his ball under the couch -again- he will stand by the couch and look at me, look at the couch, look at me, etc. and sometimes he will point or paw at it.

- If he is thirsty, he will go into the bathroom or kitchen and look at the sink (or put his feet up on the sink and look at me). I can see one of the bathrooms from my office and can see the kitchen sink from the living room. He prefers to drink the fresh running tap water rather than the water in the bowl that has "other dog's slobber in it".
- If he wants attention, he will sit and stare at me, or rest his head on my lap. But if I try to pet him and he moves away from my hand and goes back to staring, I know he wants me to go outside to throw the ball. When I use a signal I have taught him for "outside" he gets very excited and races toward the back door (returning to see if I'm coming if I'm moving too slow :-)
- If he sets a ball on the coffee table and wants me to throw it, he will point at it.
- He will nose nudge my pocket with treats in it or my back waistband where I hide his tug toy.
- More subtly, if he is staring at something and I ask "what do you want?" he will move his nose an inch or so forward, closer to the item.
- If he's tired and wants to go to bed (rare, but it has happened) he will stand in the doorway of the bedroom and look at me (if I'm sitting in the next room) and if I ask if he's tired he goes in and stares at his crate.
- At home we have a dog door, but if we are in public somewhere (training class, seminar, etc.) and he needs to go out, I can't say exactly what he does, but I recognize it. I need to teach him a cue to ask for water for when we are away from home.
- If he needs to go out during the night (rare, but sometimes he has a loose stool) he will paw at the crate door to wake me up.
- If there is something interesting outside (neighbor walking down the street, birds on the electric wire, rabbit in the neighbor's yard. etc.) he comes racing in from outside (I hear the dog door blast open) and he has "Timmy's in the well!" type body language and then he runs toward the room door, stops and looks back, comes back to me with "urgent" body language (sometimes a nose poke) and runs back toward the door. That's my cue to go check outside and be impressed by whatever is spectacularly exciting out there :-)
- If he wants to play tug, he shoves his toy into my body (hard to ignore/miss THAT signal!)
- If he hears thunder, he tries to climb into my lap with a sense of urgency that is different from the "hey mom, I need a hug" signal.
- If he wants what is on my husband's plate, he will rest his head on the arm of the recliner and move his eye contact from the food, to my husband's eyes and back to the food again repeatedly.



What does your dog do to communicate with you? Have YOU learned to listen to your dog? Or is it more likely he feel like he is talking to a wall and living with morons that just don't understand him? Have there been moments when you recognize- "hey, I think he's trying to tell me something!" and you realize the dog has been trying everything under the sun to get the message through to you?



We spend a lot of time trying to get our dogs to understand and listen to us. How much time do we spend trying to listen to them? Dogs have needs, wants and desires just like people. And they will try to communicate those needs if we are willing to listen.

So how do you learn to "listen"? Just watch your dog! Be open to trying to interpret what they are trying to say. Test your theories. Some signals are very obvious if you are willing to see them. Others are MUCH more subtle.

I love this recent post to the Dog Scout list by Susan: *"I am very slow on the uptake, but I just realized a couple weeks ago that Merlin says, "yes." If I ask him a yes or no question and the answer is yes he will lick the right side of his mouth; if the answer is no he won't! I've been testing it out "Do you want to take a car ride?" lick. "Do you want to take a bath?" no lick. He does it for other people too if they ask him yes or no questions. He is a heck of a lot smarter than I am!"*

Clicks to you Susan for being observant enough to recognize this! It makes me wonder how many subtle signals I miss from my own dogs. If you want even more examples of dog communication (in some cases- life saving communication), check out this related article:

[http://www.dogscouts.org/Communication\\_with\\_dog.html](http://www.dogscouts.org/Communication_with_dog.html)

Whether you choose to teach your dog specific signals he or she can use to communicate a need to you, or you just take the time to listen to what the dog says naturally, your dog will be much happier when he is heard.

To learn more ways to speak to and with your dog, visit [www.DogScouts.org](http://www.DogScouts.org)