

IF YOU TALK, THEY WILL LISTEN

by Lee Netzler

Communicating with a dog is a subject that quickly presents itself to all owners. The reason to communicate with a dog, of course, is to control or modify the dog's behavior in some way. These include things like getting the dog to come, to stop digging in the yard, to stay in the back seat of the family sedan, or to stop chewing the telephone cord. As Martha would say, "Being able to control the family dog is a good thing."

There are three communications methods: physical, verbal, and telepathic.

The Physical options include such things as collars and leads, puppy gates, tie-out lines, yard fencing, and so forth. The common connection between these is that they physically confine the dog in some way to restrict its freedom. Dogs, like us, have to obey the physical laws of the universe and they can't, for example, walk through solid walls. This makes it easy for most of us to "master" many of the methods of physical communication, because the dog doesn't have to "understand" the devices that are being employed.

Another avenue of communication is through telepathy. Although I am a skeptic, a friend who attended a seminar to learn the techniques involved says that she uses it and insists that it produces results. Perhaps that's true, but even if it does work, it is just not practical to resort to a telepathic session each time you want your dog to perform some simple task. Applying collar and lead, or issuing a voice command that the dog recognizes, gets the job done better.

So, what do we need to know about the "voice command that the dog recognizes?" Well, first of all, dogs might be compared to people who are relatively unfamiliar with the English language. Perhaps their "first" language is French, or German or Spanish. Even so, they may learn to recognize some English words—enough to understand what is meant in a phrase, or a sentence, or a conversation, even though they may not recognize all of the words, and even though they may never acquire the ability to speak English.

Just as important to understanding language is the "body language" of the speaker. These body postures and mannerisms display and accentuate the meaning of the spoken words. If you were seated in a restaurant in a foreign country, for example, and observed a patron speaking entreatingly to a waiter while motioning at the same time with an empty coffee cup, even though the words were unrecognizable, you would probably conclude correctly that the words were a request for a refill of coffee. This is similarly true when you speak to your dog: Your body language, including eye contact, displays your feelings and intentions—indicating if you are requesting something, or are pleased, or are angry, and so forth. Body language is so strong that the words may be unimportant. If you are angry, it doesn't make much difference to Fido whether you say "Bad Dog," or "Stupid Mutt," or "Naughty Puppy," or whatever else comes to mind. The dog will soon understand your meaning from your tone of voice and your body language.

And what about your "tone of voice?" Well, it rivals body language as a key to understanding what you mean. Again, a person who speaks in a friendly tone—that is, in a higher-pitched voice, with a positive emphasis, and as though expecting an answer—sends a message that the dog will be interested in receiving. Even if you say "Bad Dog," or "Naughty Puppy," if it is said in a pleasant tone accompanied by friendly body language, a dog which does not recognize those words will likely be happy to hear from you.

Knowing this, how do we use language to communicate with our dog? The most common example is in obedience training, where specific words mean specific things. “Sit,” only means sit; “Come” only means come. Primarily through repetition, the dog learns that each command has only one specific meaning. Commands are especially useful when it is desired that the dog react in the same way whenever the command is spoken even though the circumstances may change. Whether the dog is 10 feet away, for example, or 100 yards away, “Come” has the same meaning and essentially the same response is desired from the dog.

The most powerful command is “NO.” If a dog learns only one command, it should be ‘NO.’ This word is truly the Rosetta stone between the English language and Dogspeak.

Once learned, the command “NO” can be used with other words to expand communication. It can be adapted to stop behavior in a variety of situations: “NO Chew,” “NO Jump,” “NO Dig,” “NO Chase” are but a few examples. If used with regularity when appropriate, the dog soon learns that “NO” means stop-whatever-you-are-doing, and thereafter interprets it in that way. Eventually it doesn’t make a lot of difference if you command “NO Eating the Birthday Cake” or “NO Biting the Mail Carrier,” the dog simply understands that its current behavior is not allowed and must immediately cease.

From experience I can testify that new commands can be created. My dog Rusty obeys the command “Wait” by immediately stopping dead in his tracks. He waits at that spot until I walk up to him, touch him on the withers and release him by saying “OK.”

Verbal communications beyond commands are the most interesting and the most fun. Recognizing that your tone of voice and body language can be coupled with words so that they become appealing to your dog creates new opportunities. Everyday events can be announced and be made to sound interesting: “Let’s go out!” “Who’s hungry?” “Is somebody coming?” “See the TV, See the TV!” Before long, your dog will begin to pick up on your clues and will start to recognize the events that you are talking about. Some of these will become familiar enough so that it will stimulate reactions—barking and dancing around, for example, in anticipation of someone arriving when you ask excitedly “Is somebody coming?”

Eventually, you will find that the more you communicate in this manner, the more your dog will pay attention when you speak, particularly when your special tone of voice and body language identifies your conversation as being directly intended for the dog. As time passes, and communications become a part of your everyday routine, you will discover that you are sharing more experiences—and more enjoyable experiences—with your dog.

The kind of enjoyment you may discover can be described in an experience I had with one of my earliest Scotties, a wheaten bitch who was hopelessly addicted to treats. At that time, we used the word “cookie” to refer to any kind of treat or tidbit intended for the dogs. To our surprise, she promptly learned to pick the word “cookie” out of our conversations, no matter how casually it was spoken. As her skill improved, she was able to identify the word even when we tried to disguise it. I could, for example, speak in a normal way during an ongoing conversation and say something like, “It’s getting cold enough for a cookie snowfall later today.” She would recognize the “magic” word, and in an instant be sitting at my feet expecting me to produce a small treat, which soon became the standard reward for her unusual alertness.

We took the game a step further and began spelling “C-O-O-K-I-E” rather than saying the word. She quickly sorted that out, too, and it wasn’t long before we were able to amaze our visitors with her uncanny ability to pick the spelled word “C-O-O-K-I-E” out of random sentences. These interactions became fun for everyone. No doubt they also improved the attention our Scottie applied toward understanding our other verbalizations, too.

You don't need to be a communications expert to talk to your dog. Just make it a regular practice to include your dog verbally in the activities that you already share. And as you and your dog connect, you will be amazed and pleased at the results. Trust me: If you speak, they will listen.