

# ON COMMAND

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### Do You Speak Dog?

I often affectionately refer to the puppies in my Puppy Kindergarten as “the little aliens that were dropped into your house a few weeks ago.” The troubles with interspecies communication are plentiful as many dog owners know.

As puppies, dogs have no idea how to live in human society and a relative few come to your house with experience. We have to teach them everything that is important to us. Things like ‘please don’t pee in my bedroom’ and my ‘Jimmy Choo shoes are not your toys.’ Because these things are important to us (your dog really has no opinion about them) it is up to us to communicate. It can be difficult to get children to behave the way you want them to...and they speak English. Communicating to a dog is a skill that has to be learned if you want it to be effective. It’s really an amazing thing that a dog can be taught to ring a bell to say “I need to go out and pot-

ty.” How unnatural. But you have to know what you’re doing. This is why training the humans is so important.

“Please don’t pee in my bedroom and my Jimmy Choo shoes are not your toys.”

Dogs have an entire repertoire of signals, behaviors and motivation. Most of which are misread by our species. Does a wagging tail mean a happy dog? No, not necessarily. Do they pee in the house out of spite or anger? Never. Why do they paw at us and lick our faces? Both are submissive behaviors. What does a growl mean? Should you punish your dog for growling? The answers to these questions would probably surprise you. But if you don’t know what your dog is thinking and saying, it’s hard to respond appropriately.

Canine social behavior is very complex and cannot be reduced to simple dominant/submissive explanations. The phrase “respect has to be earned” is very apropos here. You can not force someone, human or dog, to respect you. Beware of those advising you to

force your dog into submissive positions and correct away your dog’s signals that he is uncomfortable, i.e. growling.

Regardless of whether you decide to take your pooch to a class, have a trainer come to your house or send your dog to training camp (yes, even with camp), you still have to have some training yourself if you’re going to keep the lines of communication open between yourself and your canine pal.

When researching dog trainers look for someone who is going to teach you how to understand and work with your dog in a friendly and humane manner. While many trainers may be able to train your dog it is another skill altogether to train you to work with your dog and your dog to work for you. Skilled trainers understand how to teach humans as well as dogs. Believing your dog can be trained with no training for yourself is like going to marriage counseling without your spouse.

