



Talk the Talk in Order to Walk the Walk
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It is quite possible that an animal has spoken to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention. –E.B. White, Charlotte's Web

There's an app for that. It seems there are new social media platforms emerging daily with ostensibly new, easier ways to communicate. So much so, we could be at risk of losing face time and the ability to pay real attention to the conversation.

We spend hours scrolling and scanning our news feeds. Here, we are communicating on a rather shallow level where much can be lost in translation. So much can be misinterpreted and misunderstood without the benefit of voice inflection and body language.

Dogs don't have electronic social media, but they are social animals using scent, vocalization, and body language to communicate. For more peaceful, successful walks, we need a deeper understanding of canine social interaction. It behooves us to accurately interpret what dogs are saying to each other and to us.

Instagram has become largely popular, because people appreciate visual communication. A picture is worth a thousand words, right? While dogs relate using vocalization and scent, body language is their predominant form of communication. We humans are largely left out of the scent part, so we need to concentrate on understanding the vocal and the visual.

Social animals like humans and dogs have highly evolved ways of communicating. There is a wide array of varying components to canine body language such as facial expressions, tail carriage, posture, and overall demeanor. It is helpful to break these signals down into individual components to understand the often-subtle language. However, because dogs use these signs in concert and in context, a thorough study examines the individual signals as well as the big picture.

Dogs primarily use body language to signal intent. These signals may appear random to us. They are not. They serve to relay the dog's internal state or they are a purposeful attempt to tell us something. Many of these signals are used to negotiate disputes, navigate potentially conflictive situations, and to

avoid conflict altogether. Canine body language is a window into the minds and feelings of dogs. Learning the language, builds a stronger relationship because dogs feel understood and understanding builds trust.

Study canine body language. * Learn to recognize the commonly known signals as well as lesser-known and more subtle ones. Discover the meaning of displaced behaviors, such as yawning, sneezing, and scratching. These are normal, familiar behaviors done out of context when a dog needs comfort or to escape. Learn about ambiguous behaviors where the dog's actions do not necessarily mirror his intentions. Here we must rely on the whole picture of the dog *and* the context wherein the behavior occurs.

Know that dogs can feel conflicted and give mixed messages. This is where we must make our best guess as to what the dog is feeling. But, simply knowing that he is feeling conflicted is a big step toward helping him through the uncomfortable situation.

Aren't we lucky that dogs don't use social media and texting? Think of how many times emails or texts are misinterpreted because they lack voice inflection or body language to complete the conversation. Imagine how communications are scrambled when pieces of dialogue are taken out of context.

Learning to communicate with canines builds strong, trusting relationships. It engenders patience and relieves frustration on both ends of the leash. Paying attention to the conversation and understanding it makes for a more enjoyable walking experience.

*Two excellent resources on canine body language:

Rugaas, Turid. *On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals* (Hanalei Training Center, Inc. 1997)

Aloff, Brenda. *Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide: Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog* (Dogwise Publishing 2005)

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