

A Dog's Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Five Ways to Figure Out What Your Dog Is Telling You

Does your dog ever do something that leaves you scratching your head and wondering, “Why did he (or she) do that?” If so, you’re not alone. Dogs tell us important things all the time, but sometimes we don’t “get the message.”

Dogs communicate in different ways and at different levels. Sometimes they “talk” with their tails, or their ears, or their posture. Sometimes they “talk” by barking, or yelping, or whining. Sometimes they use subtle signals that were used in wolf packs to “keep the peace.” These messages can include licking their own lips or yawning.

But dogs frequently communicate with their behavior. A dog’s actions speak louder than words. The trick is to figure out what the actions means. It can be obvious. For example, when your dog sits and begs while you’re eating a piece of steak, there’s no mystery in the message. But many messages are much more subtle than that. Here are some ways you can try to “break the code” and understand what your dog is telling you.

Consider your dog’s breeding. A dog’s behavior is often driven by its breeding. Retrievers like to retrieve. Herders like to herd. Hunters like to hunt.

My Golden Retriever, Jamie, used to stop in the middle of our morning jog. She had different reasons for stopping, but one of them was to make a polite request, “May I please pick up this pine cone and carry it the rest of the way home?”

One morning, my wife and I were jogging home, with Jamie, and I was carrying several rolled up newspapers. Jamie kept looking back at me. At first, we couldn’t figure out what she was trying to say. My wife said, “She wants you to pay attention to her.” So I stopped and gave her a friendly ear scratch. But she kept looking back at me.

Finally, my wife said, “Maybe she wants to carry the newspapers.” I gave Jamie the papers, and that was it. She held her head up high and carried them the rest of the way home. But of course, she’s a retriever.

Jamie also had some herding instincts. When we would go for a mountain hike with a group of friends, Jamie would bark loudly if anyone walked in front of her. At first, we couldn’t imagine what she was saying. But we also noticed that she would stop and wait if someone lagged behind. So, finally, we realized that Jamie was simply herding the hikers.

If your dog does something you don’t understand, consider its breeding. Is it simply trying to do something it was bred to do?

Look for patterns in your dog's behavior. There was a peculiar pattern in Jamie's decisions about "where to be." I believe that dogs are pretty thoughtful about deciding where to hang out. Sometimes, they choose places for reasons.

Sometimes Jamie would station herself comfortably along the hallway outside my office. She would lie on the floor with her body close to the wall.

At other times, she would position herself across the hallway, forcing me to step over her if I wanted to walk down the hallway.

Finally, I connected the dots. When I was working around the house and showed no signs of leaving, Jamie would lie along the wall. But if I put on business clothes or packed up my briefcase, she put her body across the hallway, as if to say, "Please don't go!"

Callie, my Golden Retriever puppy, has one toy that she treats differently from her other toys. By observing when she plays with it and how she treats it (with reverence), my wife and I have concluded that this toy (Callie's "Stinky") is her security object. She uses it as a calming device almost every evening before bedtime.

Sometimes, to figure out what your dog is saying, you have to "connect the dots." Is there a pattern to the behavior? When does it happen? Where does it happen? How often does it happen? It might take some patience, but you'll "break the code."

See if your dog is connecting the dots. Speaking of "connecting dots," dogs are pretty good dot-connectors, too. They don't miss much. One of my favorite examples of how Jamie "connected the dots," is how excited she used to get when I pulled my green backpack out of the front hall closet at Lake Arrowhead.

When Jamie saw that backpack come out of the closet, she would run to her water dish, take a big drink of water, and then stand by the front door in excited anticipation. This was all because she knew that the green backpack was a signal that we were going to the lake for a swim and she would get to swim and retrieve her "floppy disc." Jamie connected the dots.

Dogs are good observers of our people behavior. So one question to ask, when your dog does something you don't understand, is, "Have I sent some kind of signal?" "Have I done something to tell my dog what I'm doing or what might happen next?" When I get up from my desk, Callie almost always runs down the hallway, because she assume that I'm either walking her outside to go pee, or I'm going to let her out in the back yard to play soccer, which is her favorite thing to do.

See if your dog's senses are causing it to behave differently. Dogs have heightened senses, especially their senses of hearing and smell. They hear and smell things that we can't hear and smell.

When Callie first walks outside of our house, she always stops and “checks things out.” She sniffs to see if there are any unusual odors, and she listens to check out any unusual sounds. It's part of her routine.

Earlier today, Callie and I were walking through Lake Arrowhead Village. Callie loves these walks, because she makes lots of friends – both doggie friends and people friends.

But at one point today she ran behind a wall and lay down on the ground with her ears tucked under. It took me a minute to figure out what was happening. We were in front of the “Center Stage,” and a rock band was getting ready to play a concert. Their “tune up session” was blasting over the loud speakers, and it was so loud that it hurt Callie's ears. She was escaping from the loud music.

A dog's acute senses of hearing and smell can influence the messages it sends.

Listen to your dog's breathing. The other day, Callie walked into my office and sat down beside me. It was like hundreds of other times when she's done the same thing. She sat down and put her paw on my knee. I assumed she wanted a little attention, so I gave her a really good scratch on her chest.

But the chest scratch didn't get the job done. Instead of walking back to take a nap or play with her toys, she stayed beside me with her paw on my knee. Finally, I realized that her breathing was unusually heavy. Not dangerously heavy just heavy.

I wondered if she was asking me to take her out to pee. She had been out just a short time earlier, but maybe something was wrong with her system and she needed to go again. Sure enough, that was the problem. Her normal schedule wasn't working, and she needed an extra trip.

Understanding dog-talk can require a lot of detective work. But it's worth it. Think how bad you would feel if your dog said something important and you didn't understand it.