



Train-A-Pit Obedience

How to be a Responsi-Bull Pit bull Owner

Communication in the Key

I'm sure that you have figured out by now that you and your dog speak a different language. Humans expect a lot of our dogs. We want them to live in our world, abide by our rules, and learn to understand our language all while providing us companionship and sometimes still performing jobs. In return we give them food and shelter. It's a great trade off for us and dogs and that is why it has worked for 100's of 1,000's of years. The symbiotic relationship that humans share with dogs is one of the oldest on the planet.

One of the most important things to remember while living in this relationship is human communication is primarily done through speech and dogs primarily communicate through body language. Dogs use their eyes, ears, mouth, hair, tails, stance, body position, and lastly their voice. It's amazingly complicated, as is our vocabulary, and so it's a wonder that we learn how to "talk" to one another at all. As in any relationship, the key to success is that the communication goes both ways. You ask your dog to sit, and after many repetitions expect that they will understand that word and perform an action. Have you returned the favor to your dog and learned their communication cues? Do you look to their bodies and try to figure out what they are telling you instinctively ALL the time? Be honest with yourself. If the answer is no it's time to change!

Sometimes when people claim a pet's behavior changed without warning, it may well be that the people failed to notice a fairly clear signal given by the dog. Miscommunication in our own body language and behavior can cause problems in training and even lead to bites. When a child looks intently at a dog, smiles and leans forward to pet the animal's head in an act of friendliness, the dog may think the child is casting a challenging stare, showing teeth and engaging in a threatening physical approach. And people of every age have equated tail wagging with friendliness. A tail held straight up (or curled over the back) and rapidly moving from side to side in small, quick movements indicates arousal, not friendliness. It helps to remember that dogs were bred by humans for specialized tasks, and their instincts haven't had time to catch up. They are very close genetically to their wolf cousins and their communication styles are almost identical.

So how do you learn what your dog is trying to tell you? They can't give you an instruction manual and tell you to do your homework. Luckily there have been 1,000's of hours spent by canine experts on dog body language to do the interpretation for you. A wonderful book on the market right now that has illustrations and images of real dogs "talking" with complete interpretations of the images is ***Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog by Brenda Aloff***. If you invest in only one book on dog ownership this should be the one.

Here is a quick overview of each body part and its signals. Remember that when trying to read a dog, never look at only one body part. Instead, look at the whole picture and then draw your conclusions.

Overall body position: In general, "low and back" usually indicates caution, uncertainty, or submissiveness whereas "high and forward" indicates interest, excitement or dominance. Most of the time, your dog's body will be somewhere in the middle, which will indicate a calm, neutral state. A good way to notice your dog's overall body position is to imagine a directional arrow just above him, pointing in the direction he seems most likely to move. If the arrow's pointing forward, your dog is very likely to approach something (i.e. stalk the squirrel in the grass, approach and bark at the fence, move closer to and interact with the dog coming down the street). If the arrow is pointing backwards, your dog is likely to next move away.

Ears: Ears come in different shapes and sizes, but they can all swivel forward and back. Some types of ears can be harder to read than others. Dogs with long drooping ears present a greater challenge than dogs with prick ears, because when a pair of drooping ears lift up and forward, it's very subtle. On the other hand, when prick or "wolf-

shaped” ears lift up and forward, it’s easy to see. Ears pushed forward and high on the head indicate either extremely interest or extreme confidence, based on the situation. Ears that are tilted back are indicative of worry or submission. If a dog is very worried, his ears will tend to stay back. If a dog is just trying to send the message that they’re subordinate to the person or dog they’re approaching, the ears will flick back, but then righten again after a few seconds.

Eyes: Eyes can give you a lot of information about a dog’s emotional state. A relaxed dog will have pupils that are small little pinpoints. However, a nervous or very excited dog will have large, black pupils. If your dog’s pupils have become so big you cannot see the color of her eyes any longer, remove your dog from her current situation as soon as possible. Another thing to look for is “whale eye”. Whale eye is when you can see the whites of a dog’s eyes repeatedly or constantly. A relaxed dog will move her whole head to look at something. A frightened dog will widen his eyes and hold his body more stiffly. The result is that he looks at things out of the corner of his eyes and you can observe the whites more readily.

Mouth: We often notice a dog’s mouth when the lips have been lifted and the teeth are bared. Even before that sign, there are more subtle things to look for. Watch the corners of your dog’s mouth. A relaxed dog has a relaxed mouth. A cautious or frightened dog will often pull the corners of her lips backwards, making the lips appear thin and stretched. A confident dog may push her lips forward, making her mouth appear smaller or puckered.

Tail: This is the place most people look first when gauging a dog. We’ve all been taught that a friendly dog wags its tail. However, not every dog that wags his tail is friendly. Carefully watch how the tail is wagging. A tail that is held high and stiff and seems to be quivering or wagging from the middle, does not indicate a friendly gesture. This is the sort a wag a dog will have if he’s stalking prey or about to begin barking. It’s an indication of high excitement and not of a happy greeting. A tail that is wagging in a wide sweep from the base is usually means a much more calm and relaxed dog. Many dogs hold their tails lower when they’re approaching people, and a low wagging tail is usually a sign of a friendly dog. Some dogs have tails that curl over their backs and so can’t be lowered. With these types of dogs, it’s even more important to look at the rest of the body before deciding if a dog is being friendly. Lastly, a fearful dog will often tuck its tail up and against his belly. A dog with a tucked tail is indicating some kind of discomfort with the current situation.

Posture: High and forward means confidence and interest whereas low and back means submission and/or worry. You should also watch how loosely or stiffly your dog moves. A calm, relaxed dog will walk with loose limbs, whereas a tense dog will move much more stiffly. It’s important to watch your own dog’s posture when she approaches a new person. If your dog is meeting another dog, you should keep an eye on both dogs’ postures. If your dog is sending friendly signals, but the other dog is not, avoid the interaction.

Fur: Often, an excited or distressed dog will raise up the hair between his shoulder blades and/or at the base of his tail. This fur is commonly known as “hackles” and a dog with that fur standing on end is said to have “raised hackles”. Raised hackles can mean different things on different dogs and can be likened to goose bumps on humans. Some dogs raise their hackles when excited. Others do it when they’re frightened. As a general rule, even if you cannot always predict why a dog has his hackles raised, it is an indication of some sort of heightened emotion.

In conclusion, one of the biggest keys to being a good dog owner is not only expecting that they will learn and understand your cues of communication, but you will also learn what they are trying to tell you!