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Do you have your dog's consent?

When you pet your dog, are they interested in being touched? Sometimes we may think “but they love it!” or “of course, my dog loves to be pet.” But how do you know if they are actually enjoying an interaction or not?

As captive animals, our pets don't have control to make choices over much of anything in their lives. As guardians, we decide things for our dogs such as where they live, who they live with, what they eat, when and how much they eat, where and when to eliminate, where and when to go for a walk, who they get to interact with, and what equipment to wear. We make decisions for them and impose those decisions. What if, instead, we stop and pay attention to the dog's opinion? We could give them some amount of control. Control decreases stress and increases confidence.

A dog's body language provides vital information about how they are feeling, and it is important to listen to what they are saying. If we do not respect their subtle and consistent communication, they are likely to show their emotions using bigger and grander gestures. Grand gestures could include things like snarling or air snapping.

Even if the dog is unlikely to overtly growl or bite, their small gestures don't mean they are “okay” with what you're doing to them. The dog is likely to feel frustrated when they are routinely subjected to handling experiences during which they feel harassed and unlistened to (think your Aunt or Uncle pinching your cheek, ...but every day, ...not just on holidays). The irritation may spread to other circumstances and result in the dog acting in undesirable ways. In fact, it is likely that many behavior problems, like barking, chewing, mouthing, and jumping, stem from the dog feeling unable to communicate what they need in ways that are responded to by their human.

Here's an experiment. Next time you are petting your dog, watch their body. If you reach for them, what do they do? Are they moving closer to you or further away? Do they duck their head? Do they step their feet back?

What changes do you see in the rest of their body? There are many ways our dogs communicate through their body's presentation. Are their eyes softer? Do they have a low audible breath, “sigh?” Does their body melt and become looser? Do they press against you? These tend to be signs of comfort.

You may see things like moving away, avoiding your hand, pinning ears back, tongue flicking or lip licking, yawning, tail tucking, wrinkling the forehead or around the corners of the mouth, turning away from you, licking you, lifting the lip, growling, putting teeth on you (like you might think they are “playing”). These are typically ways that dogs say “I'm not enjoying this interaction.”

To be sure you can see everything during your experiment, try videoing yourself petting your dog. Then as you watch the video, check to see if your earlier assumptions are true.

When you want to pet a dog, ask the dog if they want to be touched. Try the Consent Test. If you are petting your dog, try to pet in an area that is least intrusive. Try the side, shoulder, or chest. Pet for 1-5 seconds and then remove your hands from your dog. Your dog now has the opportunity to indicate if they would like further interaction or if they have had enough. A “more please” indication could be the dog moving towards you, nudging your hand, or leaning into you. A “no, thank you” indication could be sniffing the ground, ignoring you, or moving away from you. And a “no, thank you” is okay! Listen to the “no, thank you,” by stopping what you’re doing and changing the situation. Don’t take it personally or as a judgment against your parenting. In time, you might get the enthusiastic “yes, please!” (Note the enthusiastic “yes, please!” can also be revoked at any time.)

Over the course of your dog’s life, they will encounter many instances of being handled, touched, managed, or directed. Each instance provides you with an opportunity to give your dog assurance that you are listening. This may include daily scenarios of putting on and taking off the harness, petting from family, and daily brushing or coat maintenance. They will also experience routine but less frequent handling in the form of vet visits or grooming appointments, which include having someone less familiar to touching them in ways that are more invasive or unfamiliar.

In day-to-day life, pay attention to your dog’s body language. In fact, watch other people’s interactions with their dogs. Look for patterns of behavior from the ears, eyes, head, and feet and note the circumstances in which they are happening. You’ll be more successful listening to your dog if you take into account the big picture. Just like when adding training to your dog’s life, if you are considering your dog’s body language, your communication with your dog will dramatically improve.

Bottom line, love your dog, but make sure your dog is loving what you’re doing.

Note: This topic is included in our Confidence Building classes. Further, in any of our classes or privates, handling is addressed as you are interacting with your dog. If you have any questions about this or any other dog training or behavior topic, you can [sign-up for a 30-minute phone consult with a member of our training team by using this link](#).