

# Dog.international

The Eclectic International Dog Blog



(<https://dog.international>)

## "My Dog is Stubborn!" How We Project Human Qualities onto Dogs.

📅 October 6, 2018 / 👤 Kristi Benson (<https://dog.international/author/kristi-benson/>) / ☰ Behavior Modification (<https://dog.international/category/behavior-modification/>), Dog Behavior (<https://dog.international/category/dog-behavior/>), Dog body language (<https://dog.international/category/dog-body-language/>), Positive Training (<https://dog.international/category/positive-training/>), Training (<https://dog.international/category/training/>)

(<http://www.facebook.com/DogInternational>)

([http://twitter.com/intent/follow?source=followbutton&variant=1.0&screen\\_name=dogintl](http://twitter.com/intent/follow?source=followbutton&variant=1.0&screen_name=dogintl))

(<http://instagram.com/dog.international/>) (<http://www.pinterest.com/doginternational>)



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/tree-smiling-dancing-carrots.jpg>)

What does a smiling tree and dancing carrots have to do with a "stubborn" dog? Read further to find out!

Have you ever seen a tree with a happy face showing up in the twists and curves of the bark? Or carrots with dancing legs? The tree makes you say "hello my friend!" and the carrots make you chortle a "they're doing the can-can!"

One of the many, many, *many* interesting things about humans is that we see *humans* everywhere. We see smiling or sad faces wherever there are two dots and a gently curving line. And it's not just human *faces* that we see everywhere, either... we see all kinds of human traits in everything around us: faces, motivation, and intention. For example, our internet connection has been dodgy here at the farm for a few weeks, due likely to early winter weather. I have uttered some choice words at my computer when things slow to a crawl, as though *my computer is doing it to me on purpose*. My computer is, of course, just doing what it's been programmed to do. My computer is not a brat. Or another choice word.

This ability of humans to read everything around us as human is funny and quirky. We project human faces and intentions onto our computers, our cars, our cats, random stinging and biting insects, and of course, onto our dogs. Yes, it's true: when we gaze upon the dogs in our lives, we really can't help ourselves...we project humanity on to them in all sorts of

ways. Sometimes this is totally fine, of course (read more about that here: "Digging Into Our Common Ground with Dogs" (<https://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2017/04/digging-into-our-common-ground-with-dogs.html>)). Dogs, like humans, need food and stuff to do, they feel fear and pleasure, and they are social animals. Dogs and humans have four limbs and endocrine systems. We share the ability to learn from positive reinforcement, and a love of pizza. So some of the human labels we use for dogs are absolutely reasonable: Hungry. Happy. Snoozy. Scared.

## Dogs are not Humans. They are, Quite Delightfully, Dogs.



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/labelling-dogs-not-human.jpg>)

While we are busy with our iPads, phones, and other glorious human technology, dogs enjoy being dogs...getting their doggy enrichment from things like sniffing the ground, food toys, and dog play.

Sometimes, our ability to see everything as human just doesn't work. Dogs are not humans. Humans are pretty distinct, with distinct cognitive abilities, to say nothing of our opposable thumbs, space travel, domesticated plum trees, and iPads. Dogs don't have opposable thumbs, and they don't do space travel, and they don't use iPads. Due to our many differences, some of the human labels that we try to stick on dogs simply don't work. In fact, these labels can be damaging to our dogs and to our relationship with our dogs. In these cases, when we label our dogs or their behaviour in human terms, things can go awry.

There are a few labels that are worth exploring, as they're among the more damaging to our dogs, and yet they're the most tempting to use when we look, through our human eyes, at our four-legged friends.

### **"My Dog is Stubborn."**



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/stubborn-dog.jpg>)

Dogs aren't stubborn, just like trees don't smile. A dog called "stubborn" is almost always undertrained. When we understand that, we can then productively move forward to provide the training they need to reliably respond to our cues.

A dog who doesn't *listen* or *do* what *we want* is often called stubborn. This implies they're willfully ignoring our issued command. It's either a personality defect or a moral failing of the hapless dog in question, usually. "My dog *can't* learn to come when I call, she's so *stubborn!*" But stubborn, when applied to a dog in this sense, is a smiley face in a tree: it's not really there. A dog called stubborn is almost always undertrained.

Dogs learn to do stuff in a wholly different way than we expect. We expect to show them once or twice, and then magically, voila, they know it! Like if I tell you a couple of times that the capital city of Canada is Ottawa, and pull out a map to point it out, you'll likely be able to remember that. The capital city of Canada is Ottawa! (No, it's not Toronto. I promise.)

But a dog's ability to respond to our cues is much more like your ability to lift weights. When you start out, you might only lift the bar. Over time, you'll gain strength, and you'll add weights to the bar. With many, many repetitions, you'll become stronger, and finally, meet your goal. But you'll need repetitions to keep lifting that weight, forever.

So, what if I added ten times what you could currently lift to the bar all at once and said *lift this*. When you weren't able to, imagine how you'd feel if I became confused. Angry. Upset. Well, aren't you stubborn? I might say. Why aren't you lifting it? I showed you how.

Dogs need to practice the behaviours we'd like to see from them in a very particular way. First of all, they need repetitions. They need repetitions of success, just like we do when we're building strength. And second, they need an ever-increasing level of difficulty. Ten repetitions of level one can be followed by ten repetitions at level two. Dogs, like weightlifters, can't jump from level one to level 19. And they simply won't succeed with only one repetition at any level.

## **"My Dog has an Attitude."**



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/dog-attitude.jpg>)

Dogs don't have attitudes, just like trees don't smile. A dog with "attitude" is almost always under-motivated to perform the behaviour we're asking for.

Attitude is another word for dogs who do something other than what is asked. A dog who doesn't come when her owner barks "COME" at the dog park has *attitude*. A dog who barks, or humps, or zooms, when we want them to do our human stuff has *attitude*. Any time a well-trained dog gets it wrong and the owner says "she knows what to do but she's not doing it!", attitude is at play. But attitude, when applied to a dog in this sense, is a smiley face in a tree: it's not really there. A dog with attitude is almost always under-motivated to perform the behaviour we're asking for.

Wait, motivated? We need to motivate our dogs when we want them to *do* something? A resounding yes, yes, yes!

Kristi Benson and Jean Donaldson talk about motivation in dog tr...



Sure, dogs have a lot of personality. They have their own desires and choose what gives them joy. But unlike a surly teen who may indeed have a bit of attitude, dogs are much more innocently having fun with life. And if we want them to do the work of coming when we call them, sitting when we ask, and so on, we need to provide some kind of a paycheque. And for dogs, the paycheque is either the carrot (but not the can-can kind) or the stick: we can either motivate with the things dogs like, such as food rewards, or the things they don't like: scary and painful consequences. Modern dog trainers choose the carrot, full stop. In fact, the various forms of the stick (shock collars, prong collars, and so on) are becoming illegal in some countries around the world as we see that they're both unnecessary and dangerous.

## "My Dog is Needy."



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/needy-dog.jpg>)

Dogs aren't "needy" in the typical sense of that word, just like trees don't smile. A "needy" dog is almost always conflicted or anxious, or just doing a behaviour they have been rewarded for doing in the past.

A dog who sticks close to their human may be called *needy*. Dog trainers often see this sequence of events. A dog sidles up to their owner, who says in a mild tone "not right now". The dog stays and leans in. The owner says, in a much firmer tone, "go away! I don't want hair on my pants right now!" The dog presses even harder. The owner yells "Why don't you listen!" The dog finally listens and leaves. Then there's the plaintive glance to the dog trainer. "See? See how needy he is?"

Dogs do indeed need certain things to be healthy and happy. They need food, they need exercise, they need enriching and challenging activities, and they need chewies. But *needy*, when applied to a dog in this sense, is a smiley face in a tree: it's not really there. A needy dog is almost always conflicted, anxious, or possibly just doing a behaviour they have been rewarded for doing in the past. Let's examine this situation again.

A dog sidles up to their owner, seeking contact, because in the past when the owner sits in that spot the dog has been rewarded for coming up and sitting nearby. The reward? Love and patting. The owner says in a mild tone "not right now". The dog either finds this warning to be worrisome and fear-inducing all by itself, or knows from previous experience that this tone predicts his owner getting angry, which is scary to many dogs. The dog therefore attempts to diffuse aggression from the owner in the way dogs do: he stays and leans in, lowering his body and putting his ears back, as if to say "I'm no threat to you. Please don't harm me". The owner says, in a much firmer tone, "go away! I don't want hair on my pants right now!" The dog, seeing that his mild attempts to diffuse the situation aren't working and starting to get seriously worried, presses even harder. The owner yells "Why don't you listen!" The dog, out of options to diffuse his owner's aggressive display, slinks away in fear.

Needy dogs are needy in a sense: they need to feel confident and safe with their owners, and they need to have their needs met. A lovely romp in the park and a good chew will keep the dog away from the owner's side, generally. And the dog will not need to diffuse the owner's anger with appeasing displays, if the owner recognizes why the dog keeps getting more and more clingy, and stops participating in this sad cycle.

Finally, a dog who pesters out of a gleeful love of humans can be trained to do another behaviour, such as a 'run to your mat and lay down for a bit'. They're not being needy, they're just being a dog. You can tell if your dog is feeling anxious by doing a body-language check-in: you'll see some or all of ears back, body hunched, liplicks, or tucked tail, which have the overall effect of the dog trying to look small.

## "My Dog is Acting Guilty."



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/guilty-dog.jpg>)

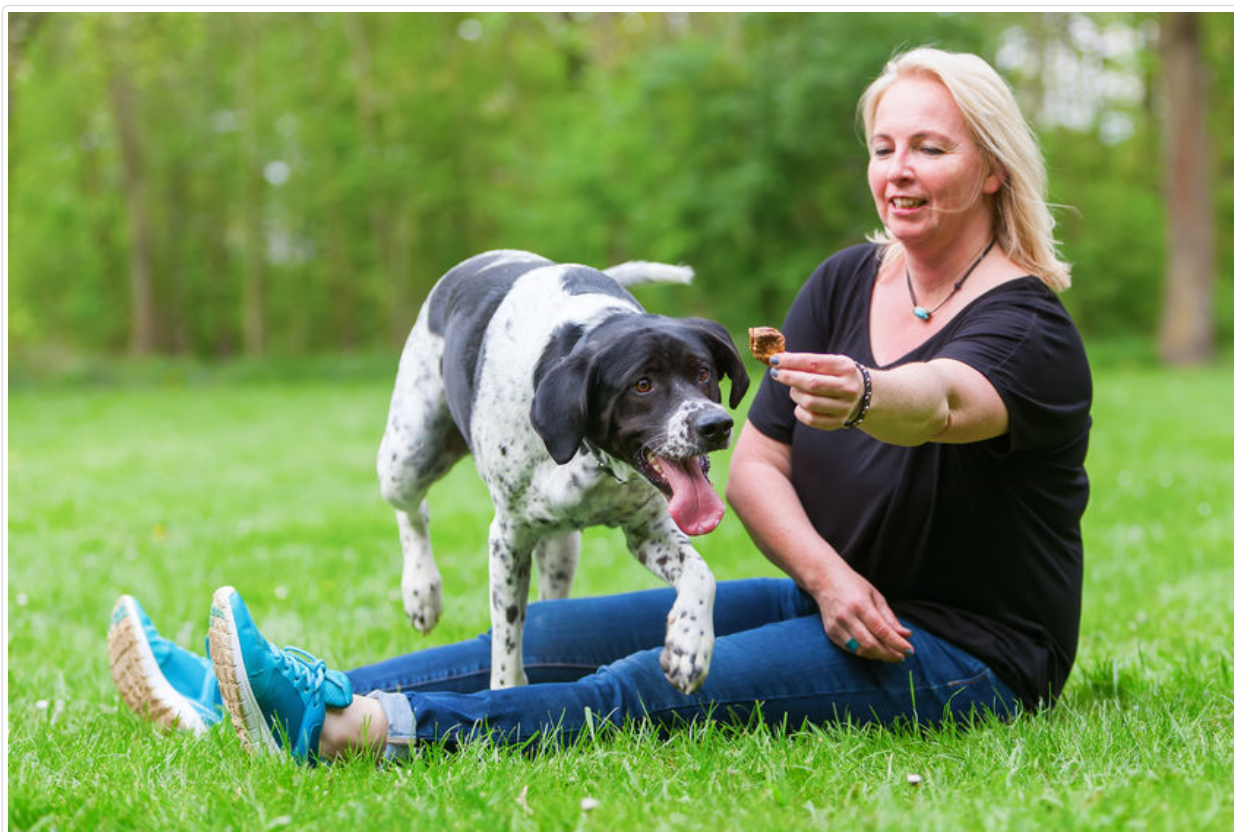
Dogs don't act guilty, just like trees don't smile. The "guilty" look is actually your dog feeling scared, and scared of you, because of a history of punishment.

When dogs chew on things we'd prefer they didn't, or are otherwise naughty when we're not home, we often come back to a mess...and our dogs offer us this *guilty* look. Ears down, head tucked, body hunched: the picture of contrition. We may rail and rant, but it doesn't seem to change things. It happens again and again. And every time, out comes the guilty look. But *guilty*, when applied to a dog in this sense, is a smiley face in a tree: it's not really there. Your guilty dog is scared, and they're scared of you.

Dog researchers have done some very interesting studies about the guilty look (read more here: "The Guilty Looking Companion" (<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/dog-spies/the-guilty-looking-companion/>)) and they find, again and again, that it doesn't happen when dogs do something we don't want them to. It happens when they anticipate, or are getting, a 'scolding'. Dogs get this look when we are punishing them. They are attempting to diffuse our aggression towards them. An aggression that, since it can come many minutes or hours after they chewed the couch or ripped apart the trash bag, is really and truly random in their eyes. Some dogs start to show these appeasing gestures as soon as they see their owners, due to a long history of 'seeing my owner' predicting 'random aggression from my owner'.

Alone-time chewing and destruction frequently comes from two states: a bored dog who needs to chew, or separation anxiety/distress. If your dog's chewing needs aren't being met or they're bored and restless, confine them when you're gone for a while. Get them hooked on chew objects you're happy to provide, like stuffed and frozen food toys, bully sticks, and so on. Set your dog up for success by locking the trash bin and anything tempting away in the back room. It's also a good idea to make sure your dog has had enough exercise. There's truth to the maxim that a tired dog is a good dog. If your dog is distressed when you're gone, speak to a qualified trainer and consult with your veterinarian or a vet behaviourist, as this is a condition which often responds well to treatment.

## Won't People Label Me As Soft?



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/dog-training-repetition.jpg>)

You need to reinforce the behaviour that you want, and build strong behaviour with lots of repetitions in increasingly difficult environments if you want a well-trained dog. No-one calls their boss "soft" for issuing a paycheque.

I love the idea of seeing our kind and proactive actions towards our dogs as simply meeting our dog's needs. This framing allows you to cast aside any of those tut-tut labels that *you* get when you're being a good dog owner (you know the type: you're *spoiling* your dog when you provide anything more than a cold hard floor and a handful of cheap kibble). You

are a good, smart dog trainer if you recognize that you need to reinforce the behaviour that you want, and when you build strong behaviour with lots of repetitions in increasingly difficult environments. And preventing our dogs from feeling fear is surely one of the most beneficial and caring things we can do.

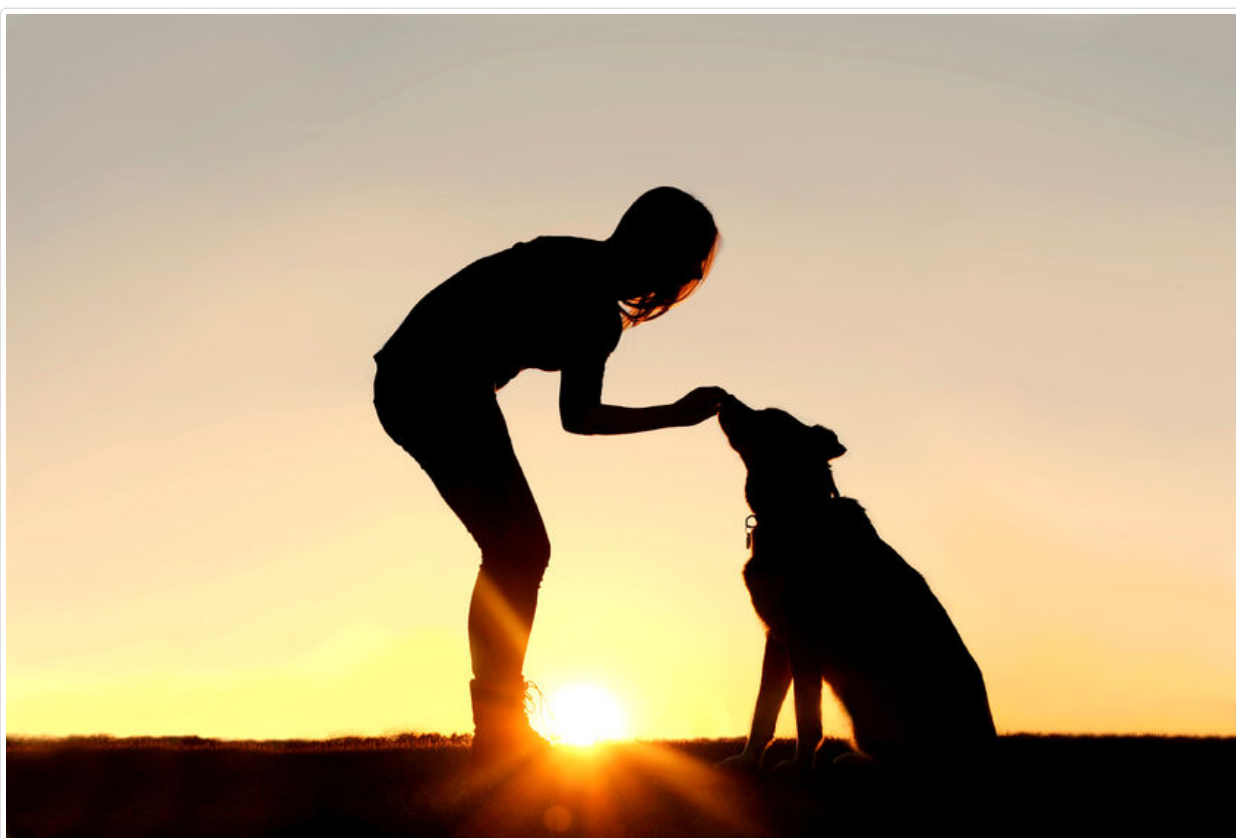
## What Can I Call My Dog, Then?

Well now that I've taken a bunch of those tempting labels and tossed them in the trash, you'll probably need a few replacement labels to throw around. Here's some that I use on my own crew, although I'm sure that you can add a bunch of your own.

1. My dog isn't \_\_\_\_, he's *meeting his own needs*. I'll need to redirect him to...
2. My dog isn't \_\_\_\_, he's *just being a dog*. I'll need to train him and motivate him to...

Finally, if you avoid the situations where your dog finds you a bit scary, you simply won't see the guilty look anymore, nor will there be any clinging appeasement behaviour either. Instead, you'll see a dog who has no conflict when you get home, and they'll feel nothing but joy.

In fact, if you change your focus from *labelling your dog's missteps* and instead get to work setting them up to succeed, training them in a way that respects their nature and needs, and keeping them safe, you won't even need replacement labels. You'll be too busy enjoying their glorious canine antics and snuggling in.



(<http://dog.international/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/labelling-dogs.jpg>)

When we let go of human-like labels and treat and train our dogs like the amazing, unique species that they are, it deepens our bond with them, sets up realistic expectations, and opens the door to a much happier and cozier existence.

(<http://www.facebook.com/DogInternational>)

([http://twitter.com/intent/follow?source=followbutton&variant=1.0&screen\\_name=dogintl](http://twitter.com/intent/follow?source=followbutton&variant=1.0&screen_name=dogintl))

(<http://instagram.com/dog.international/>)    (<http://www.pinterest.com/doginternational>)

### Image attribution

Sjale/Shutterstock.com, hitmanphoto/Shutterstock.com, Ana Fidalgo © 123RF.com, Valerii Kirsanov © 123RF.com, Susan Richey-Schmitz © 123RF.com, Christian Mueller © 123RF.com, christingasner © 123RF.com, a\_v\_a /Pixabay.com, PixelwunderByRebecca /Pixabay.com.





(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

**This blog post is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)**

**We encourage you to copy and share this blog post! But please respect the author by complying with his or her chosen Creative Commons license.** View human-readable license summary (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). (Note that this license only applies to the text of the blog post, not to any media files embedded in the post, including images and videos, as some of these may contain a third-party copyright license.) Alternatively, you may share the post freely via social media by clicking on the social icons elsewhere on this page.

About

Latest Posts



**Kristi Benson ([Http://Www.kristibenson.com](http://www.kristibenson.com))**

Coach and Mentor at Academy for Dog Trainers (<https://academyfordogtrainers.com/>)

Kristi Benson is an honours graduate of the Academy for Dog Trainers where she earned her Certificate in Training and Counseling. She lives and works in the Parkland Region of central Manitoba, Canada, where she teaches dog obedience classes and helps dog owners in private consultations - both in-person and via video chat - for a full range of dog problems, from basic obedience to fear and aggression. Kristi is also on staff at the Academy for Dog Trainers, helping to shape the next generation of canine professionals. Kristi's dogs are rescue sled dogs, and for fun she runs them with a dog-powered scooter and on skis. Contact her through her website (<http://www.kristibenson.com/>) and check out her blog. (<http://www.kristibenson.com/blog>)

- anthropocentrism (<https://dog.international/tag/anthropocentrism/>), Anthropomorphizing dogs (<https://dog.international/tag/anthropomorphizing-dogs/>), dog behavior (<https://dog.international/tag/dog-behavior/>), dog training (<https://dog.international/tag/dog-training/>), Dog with attitude (<https://dog.international/tag/dog-with-attitude/>), Guilty dog (<https://dog.international/tag/guilty-dog/>), Labelling dogs with human-like characteristics (<https://dog.international/tag/labelling-dogs-with-human-like-characteristics/>), Needy dog (<https://dog.international/tag/needy-dog/>), Stubborn dog (<https://dog.international/tag/stubborn-dog/>)

**Leave a Reply**

Your email address will not be published.

Large empty text area for the comment body.

Input field for the commenter's name.

Name

Post Comment button