

How We Talk to Dogs: A Just Behaving Approach

Foundational Communication The way we communicate with our dogs profoundly shapes their behavior, emotional well-being, and the quality of our relationship. At Just Behaving, we understand communication as foundational—not simply a training method, but a language of guidance and mentorship that deeply influences our dogs' lifelong behavior and emotional health.

Our desire to communicate with dogs naturally arises from our emotional needs: to connect, nurture, and express affection. Just as humans rely on verbal interaction to establish bonds and understanding, it feels instinctive and necessary to "talk" to our dogs. Yet, canine communication operates differently from human interactions, especially during puppyhood. Initially, communication with puppies is largely one-directional, relying on us conveying clear expectations without immediate reciprocal understanding. This demands a mindful approach (mindfulness: consciously aware and intentional), involving careful observation and gradual refinement of our communication to foster genuine understanding.

Our interactions with dogs require constant adaptation. Through experience, we learn what forms of communication work, evolving from initial uncertainty toward mutual comprehension. However, unlike human relationships, our window to shape this understanding with puppies is extremely limited—days or weeks rather than years. Therefore, exercising mindfulness (intentional, calm awareness) in how and when we speak or choose silence becomes crucial for establishing stable, harmonious relationships.

Progression of Communication Over Time

Communication between humans and dogs evolves significantly as the dog matures, mirroring their developmental journey from puppyhood to adulthood. Initially, during the critical early period (8–12 weeks), communication must be clear, explicit, and often physical, as puppies don't yet understand verbal cues or subtle signals. During this formative stage, puppies primarily learn through consistent environmental management, calm guidance, and deliberate body language. Families communicate clearly through gentle, immediate redirection, modeling calmness, and establishing predictable routines to build foundational trust and understanding.

As puppies enter the 3-6 month period, their capacity for learning and recognizing patterns rapidly expands. During this phase, families gradually transition toward more verbal communication, carefully attaching consistent verbal cues to already-established behaviors, but maintaining minimal repetition to avoid confusion. The emphasis shifts slightly from environmental management toward clear, calm guidance, relying more on quiet verbal markers and subtle body language. This period is crucial for reinforcing the association between spoken words, like their name and essential commands ("here," "sit," or "wait"), and their intrinsic understanding of expected behaviors. Timing is especially critical here—communication and feedback must occur within the one- to three-second window to ensure clarity and reliable behavioral responses.

From approximately six months to one year, communication progressively becomes subtler as puppies mature and internalize expectations. Families transition from explicit instruction toward indirect correction and nuanced signals. Commands are given less frequently, replaced increasingly by calm gestures, minimal verbal cues, and mindful silence, allowing the dog to

naturally reflect, problem-solve, and choose appropriate behaviors independently. At this stage, the goal shifts toward reinforcing emotional stability and intrinsic self-regulation, encouraging dogs to become less dependent on external prompts.

As dogs reach maturity (one to two years), communication further evolves to become largely intuitive, subtle, and relationship-based. Just Behaving dogs, having been raised with consistent calm mentorship and structured leadership, respond reliably to minimal verbal cues, nuanced body language, or simply the handler's calm, confident presence. Verbal communication at this stage is minimal and purposeful—reserved for important instructions or urgent situations—while subtle shifts in posture or quiet eye contact often suffice for everyday interactions. Families who have invested in the early stages of clear, calm, and consistent communication find their mature dogs naturally attuned, trustworthy, and responsive without the need for constant verbal or physical intervention.

Throughout each developmental phase, the essence of Just Behaving communication remains constant: it evolves from explicit to subtle, always grounded in mutual respect, emotional calmness, and mindful presence. By understanding and adapting communication strategies appropriately to each stage of a dog's life, families foster relationships defined by genuine connection, intrinsic understanding, and natural harmony—ultimately creating deeply balanced, emotionally intelligent lifelong companions.

Illustrative Examples of Communication Evolution

To illustrate how communication naturally evolves throughout your dog's development, consider these practical examples tracking the same behaviors across different age stages:

Greeting Visitors Example

- **8-12 weeks:** When visitors arrive, you physically guide your puppy to a designated spot, using gentle body blocking to prevent jumping and maintaining calm presence until the puppy settles.
- **3-6 months:** As visitors approach, you use a clear but calm "place" cue paired with a subtle hand signal directing toward the designated spot, followed by quiet acknowledgment when the puppy complies.
- **6-12 months:** Before visitors enter, a simple glance toward the designated spot and a subtle "place" reminder is sufficient as your dog has begun to anticipate the expectation.
- **1-2 years:** Your mature dog naturally moves to the designated greeting spot when hearing visitors approach, requiring no verbal cue—perhaps just a confirming nod or calm acknowledgment of this appropriate choice.

Walking Communication Example

- **8-12 weeks:** During early leash experiences, physical guidance is primary—stopping immediately when pulling occurs and only resuming when the puppy naturally returns to your side, creating clear physical feedback.
- **3-6 months:** A gentle "with me" verbal cue paired with a subtle leash signal helps refocus attention when distractions appear, but physical stopping still reinforces boundaries when needed.

- **6-12 months:** Brief eye contact or a quiet "with me" reminder is typically sufficient to regain focus near distractions, with physical guidance needed only in highly stimulating environments.
- **1-2 years:** Your mature dog walks reliably by your side with minimal guidance, responding to subtle shifts in your pace or direction without verbal cues, maintaining awareness of your movement through peripheral attention.

Signs of Readiness for Communication Progression

As you consider evolving your communication approach, watch for these indicators that your dog is prepared for more subtle guidance:

- Consistent, reliable responses to current communication methods
- Anticipation of expectations before cues are given
- Quick recovery from distractions with minimal intervention
- Calm, confident decision-making in familiar situations
- Sustained eye contact and attention during interactions
- Natural checking in without prompting

By observing these readiness signals and gradually refining your communication approach accordingly, you'll foster your dog's natural progression toward intrinsic understanding and self-regulation—the hallmarks of a Just Behaving companion.

Core Concepts

1. Talking to a Dog vs. Inciting Excitement

- Communication should nurture calmness, not trigger excitement. For instance, calmly greeting a puppy rather than using excited, high-pitched tones avoids creating anxious anticipation.
- Deliberate tone, volume, and inflection (pitch and emphasis in speech) guide lasting behavioral responses.
- Calm interaction creates security; excitement can lead to instability (e.g., a puppy becoming overly excited at the door, struggling to settle).

Mindful Body Language

When interacting with puppies, the subtlety of our body language carries deep meaning. Human instinct to use playful, puppy-like movements can unintentionally create confusion or excitement. It's essential to maintain awareness to prevent intimidating or confrontational postures (hovering, leaning in, cornering puppies) and to avoid overly playful gestures (tussling, wrestling). Instead, rely on natural, calm, and confident movements that puppies can interpret clearly. Authentic, mindful body language helps puppies accurately learn human expectations, ensuring smoother and more meaningful interactions.

Anthropomorphism: Understanding Canine Perspectives

A common and subtle obstacle in human-dog relationships is anthropomorphism—the attribution of human thoughts, emotions, or intentions to dogs. While it's natural for humans to interpret canine behaviors through a human emotional lens, doing so can unintentionally shape unrealistic or inaccurate expectations for dogs. For instance, when a puppy appears guilty after having an accident indoors or damaging an object, owners might assume the puppy feels genuine remorse. In reality, the puppy is responding solely to the owner's emotional state or learned associations, not experiencing guilt or moral understanding. Just Behaving encourages families to consciously recognize and avoid these anthropomorphic interpretations, instead focusing on clear, consistent communication based on canine perception and immediate, appropriate responses. Understanding the dog's emotional world on its own terms—not human assumptions—ensures clarity, reduces confusion, and creates authentic emotional balance in your relationship.

Human Emotional Regulation and Puppy Communication

Our emotional state directly influences our puppies' emotional responses and behavior. Puppies are highly attuned emotional learners, absorbing calmness, anxiety, excitement, or tension from us. Maintaining emotional calmness (staying steady and composed), especially when facing puppy confusion or mistakes, significantly influences their emotional development and self-regulation (the puppy's ability to manage its own emotional responses) capabilities. For example, if a puppy makes a mistake during potty training, responding with quiet patience rather than frustration teaches calm resolution instead of anxious avoidance.

Awareness of our emotional state—pausing to regulate our reactions before engaging with the puppy—is essential. Simple mindfulness practices, such as deep breathing, quiet speech, and deliberate movements, can reset our emotional baseline. By deliberately choosing steadiness, families communicate effectively without unintentionally imprinting anxiety or instability.

Emotional Control Clarification

A critical but subtle aspect of effective dog communication is emotional control—not just in outward actions, but also in managing your internal emotional state. Dogs are exceptionally sensitive to human emotions, often sensing tension, frustration, or anxiety even when not explicitly expressed. Maintaining emotional steadiness, even in frustrating or stressful situations, ensures clear, effective communication. For instance, if your dog has wandered off or ignored a recall for several minutes, it can be tempting to react with frustration or anger when they finally return. However, the Just Behaving approach emphasizes consciously controlling your internal emotional reaction, welcoming your dog back calmly and positively, regardless of how frustrated you might feel inside. This internal discipline prevents confusion or anxiety, preserving your dog's trust and reinforcing that returning is always a safe and rewarding experience.

Spectrum of Inflection and Volume

Puppies rapidly learn through auditory signals, meaning inflection and volume become critical communication tools. Quiet, low-inflection communication nurtures calmness and emotional stability, while occasional louder, low-inflection commands convey seriousness or urgency without causing panic.

Examples include:

- **Neutral Communication:** Calmly greeting your dog each morning conveys stability.

- **Emergency Stop:** Firmly and urgently calling a dog away from danger.
- **Corrections or Redirections:** Calmly redirecting minor misbehaviors.

Explicit Timing: The 1-3 Second Rule

In canine communication, timing is everything. Dogs live primarily in a one- to three-second window of association, meaning they connect feedback (positive or negative) directly to the immediate action preceding it. At Just Behaving, this principle shapes our entire approach to communication and mentorship. Immediate, clearly timed feedback ensures your puppy accurately understands what behavior you're acknowledging or correcting. For example, if your puppy responds positively to a calm command, immediate gentle acknowledgment clearly connects the behavior and the response. Conversely, delayed or untimely reactions—such as reprimanding your dog upon its delayed return after being called—create confusion. The dog associates the reprimand with returning, not with the earlier unwanted behavior. Practicing timely, clear communication fosters a reliable understanding between you and your dog, reinforcing appropriate

Moments of Silence

Mindful silence serves as a powerful communication tool, especially during confusion, uncertainty, or mild anxiety. Choosing silence over repetitive commands or emotional reactions gives puppies space to independently "reset" and regain calmness. Families naturally recognize these reset moments through attentive observation, reinforcing calm acknowledgment afterward. Silence clearly communicates expectations without adding confusion, enhancing intrinsic emotional regulation (internal ability to manage emotions without external prompts).

For example, if a puppy is hesitant to climb stairs, families should resist the instinct to repetitively encourage them verbally. Instead, calmly waiting or quietly stepping closer to offer gentle presence provides space for the puppy to process, return to calm, and naturally find confidence to climb the stairs.

Handling Confusion

- Offer quiet space for puppies to independently process and resolve confusion.
- Allowing independent thought builds confidence and thoughtful decision-making.

Practical Applications

- **Potty Training Communication:** Potty training can be a confusing time for puppies, as they learn new routines and boundaries. Instead of reacting emotionally or excitedly when accidents occur, calmly guide puppies to the appropriate location, offering clear, quiet redirection. Avoid repetitive or excited verbal cues, which can heighten confusion or anxiety. Consistent, calm interactions reinforce the puppy's intrinsic understanding of expectations, encouraging quicker internalization of proper behavior. For instance, if a puppy begins to potty indoors, gently and quietly interrupt them and calmly lead them outside, then quietly acknowledge success without excessive praise. Over time, this

mindful, steady approach fosters confident learning and reliable, long-term potty training habits.

- **Leash Communication:** The leash in Just Behaving symbolizes a mentorship relationship rather than a tool for control or restriction. Effective leash communication involves minimal, calm cues, emphasizing the relationship and mutual understanding between you and your dog. Rather than using constant corrections or repeated commands, rely on gentle, clear signals that naturally guide your dog's movement and responses. For instance, when introducing a puppy to the leash, remain calm and stationary at first, allowing the puppy to experience the leash's gentle tension naturally and return to a comfortable position beside you. Gradually introduce subtle movements, clearly defining leash time as a calm, structured activity separate from exploratory or social interactions. This approach helps puppies internalize leash etiquette naturally, fostering long-term, calm companionship on walks.
- **Greeting and Socialization:** Greeting and social interactions set a lasting tone for puppies' expectations and behaviors around people and other dogs. At Just Behaving, greetings emphasize calmness over excitement. When families or visitors enter the home, the natural tendency might be to use excited, high-pitched voices or gestures that unintentionally encourage jumping, barking, or overstimulation. Instead, families should consistently model and encourage neutral, calm tones and controlled movements during greetings. By gently acknowledging a puppy only when it is calm and composed, the puppy learns that calm behavior, rather than excitement, earns positive attention. This approach not only helps puppies develop balanced and polite social habits but also ensures they remain emotionally stable and confident in new or stimulating environments.
- **Teaching Calm Approaches:** Teaching puppies to remain calm and composed in various situations is essential to their long-term emotional stability and harmonious integration into family life. Rather than attempting to verbally coax or reassure puppies during confusing or stressful situations, practice patience and silence to encourage their natural ability to self-regulate and manage their emotional responses. For example, when a puppy becomes overly excited or anxious, resist the temptation to immediately comfort or verbally soothe them with excitement or repetition. Instead, calmly wait, allowing the puppy space to naturally process their emotions, and gently acknowledge their return to calmness. This mindful approach consistently reinforces the importance of self-regulation, gradually teaching puppies that calm behavior is not only expected but also the most rewarding state.

- **Name Usage Variations:**

The way we use a dog's name significantly influences their responsiveness and emotional state. In the Just Behaving philosophy, we intentionally vary our tone and inflection based on the context, clearly communicating the intended response and the urgency of a situation. Casual usage, such as softly saying "Hey, Ladybird," serves as neutral acknowledgment, reinforcing calm and stable companionship without expecting immediate action. When gaining attention or seeking focused responsiveness, we use a firm yet calm tone, clearly signaling that their attention is needed without inducing stress or excitement. Finally, in true emergencies or urgent scenarios, we use a deeper, more

resonant command, clearly distinguishing it from everyday communication. This layered approach ensures clarity for the dog, helping them intuitively understand the difference between routine interaction, focused attention, and urgent compliance. For example, a casual greeting like “Hey, Ladybird,” softly acknowledges your dog's presence, allowing them to remain calmly settled. Conversely, using a firm, direct tone—“Ladybird”—clearly signals the need for attentive responsiveness, useful during training or redirecting attention. In an emergency, the deep, resonant command—“LADYBIRD!”—immediately communicates the seriousness of the situation, prompting swift, reliable action. This consistency in communication, paired with clear timing, teaches your dog precisely how to respond to their name appropriately in various contexts, creating a balanced, responsive companion.

Through mindful communication, thoughtful silence, intentional body language, and emotional self-regulation, Just Behaving families nurture deeply balanced, naturally calm, and emotionally intelligent dogs—lifelong companions who thrive without constant external management.