



Excerpts from “The ABC’s of Dog Language” by Anders Hallgren
Learn How Dogs Communicate

The Dog Talks in Various Ways

Touch

Dogs often touch each other and, just as frequently, they touch humans. Two types of messages can be conveyed by touch: one is the desire to be closer by reducing distance, while the other type aims at increasing distance by a provoking or threatening type of contact.



It is much more comfortable chewing a stick when you can touch a strong protector at the same time.

Normal physical contact for a dog most often involves using its face (primarily the nose) to touch parts of the face of the other dog or, in the case of humans, their faces or hands. A dog can nudge with the nose; it can fiddle cautiously, or stroke itself lightly against somebody. Quite often, a friendly contact can also be established with a paw, either in the form of a gentle touch or a more marked scratching. This type of contact is normally supported by one or more signals of submission such as: ears pressed toward the rear, the corners of the mouth pulled backwards, licking movements with the tongue, the tail wagging in a low position, and some light yelping. The dog does not necessarily show all these signals at the same time; it typically chooses an appropriate selection of them.

In situations like these, both parties carefully avoid making eye-contact – that could be perceived as a threat. Try to make eye contact with a dog in a similar situation, and you will see how it turns its head away!

The most common ways for the dog to make physical contact is by laying its head in our lap, offering its paw, or nudging its nose against our hand or arm. These normal distance reducing ways of touching are primarily seen among dogs in connection with coat care, sex, and play. Touching is common among wolves. Ziemen (1981) reports that, when they roam their territory in search of prey, each of them makes nose-to-nose body contact with another wolf about six times per hour.



Excerpts from “The ABC’s of Dog Language” by Anders Hallgren
Learn How Dogs Communicate

Nurturing and grooming behaviour

The bitch shows the fundamental grooming behaviour in taking care of her puppies. She licks the small ones on their bellies and carefully cleans their coats. Sometimes another dog, often female, takes part in this puppy care. An adult dog’s massage of the puppies’ bellies with its tongue is important for stimulating the gastrointestinal system of the newborn puppies. The mother also licks them in order to keep them clean. She especially licks and eats their urine and stools, which otherwise could irritate their tender skin.

Adult dogs groom each other too, although it is less common than for certain other animals, such as cats and primates. It is seen more frequently between dogs that have developed an especially strong and intense relationship. The puppy who is being licked by the mother’s loving, rough tongue obviously enjoys it. A Flat-Coated Retriever breeder who let a female keep a puppy from one litter observed that, even when this puppy was more than one year of age, the mother still “washed” it every morning.

Maybe the mother’s care for the puppies is one of the reasons adult dogs appreciated our petting. There could be some primary security feeling provided by this touch, like a learned feeling of pleasure, recalling the time when the world was completely safe, thanks to the mother. The warm tongue is associated with this feeling of security.

When we observe a dog’s reaction, it appears that the way it experiences touch on different parts of its body varies. Touching of some parts seems to have a relaxing effect. The chest and the belly are typical examples of this. Maybe the reason is that this is where the dog as a puppy was licked by its mother, so that being kindly touched on the belly leads to a secretion of endorphins, a special kind of “pleasure hormones”, in the brain.

In contrast to this, no parallel exists between patting a dog and the caring and grooming behaviour among dogs. Patting is a typically human gesture, probably originating from the pat on the shoulder. Therefore, patting may not be such an encouraging and effective reward to the dog as we believe. Although this supposed enhancement of praise is so commonly used on all kinds of dog training courses, we should reconsider our perception of its efficiency. Patting can easily be replaced with other, probably more effective, expressions of appreciation, such as kindly stroking the dog’s body, or rewarding it in other ways.