

Communicating Through Chaos Avoiding Common Mistakes

Often, I am asked how to get an overexcited, out of control dog to listen. The fact is, your dog is always “listening.” However, humans and dogs communicate differently. So, the messages you think you are giving your dog may be getting lost in translation.

In the chaos of the moment, people will try anything to calm their dogs down. Unfortunately, most of these attempts lead to mistakes that only make the problem worse.

Mistake #1: Repeating Commands Multiple Times

If your dog has not responded to your initial command, I guarantee you that he is not going to respond to the next five commands. You may think you are showing firmness in repeating the commands; however, your dog has “tuned you out” and he will continue to ignore any verbalization from you. When you repeat a command multiple times, the message you send to your dog is this: “Don’t worry you’ve got time. Go ahead and run around—I’ll probably say ‘sit’ about 5 more times before I get mad. In fact, as you know from experience, I might just give up completely if something distracts me!”

Dogs communicate with one other primarily through the use of body language, not verbal commands. A pack leader uses body language, not verbalization to get what he wants. The Alpha dog will stand tall in front of an object, facing a pack member, making direct eye contact and using his body language to tell the pack member to back off. As your dog’s Alpha, you should stand tall in front of the door or the person, stare at your dog, and block him from approaching in that manner. Vocalization is not needed, but you can say “No” using a low and guttural voice.

Keep in mind, your dog may not respond immediately if he knows that he has worn you down previously. If your dog does not respond to your body language, place a leash on his collar and correct. Do not praise for obedience or if your dog calms down at this point; praise will very likely bring on the excited behavior again.

Mistake #2: Raising Your Voice

When a pack leader reprimands a pup, it is a low guttural growl, not a high-pitched bark. A high-pitched sound shows excitement. Most human yelling ends up sounding like more barking to your dog; therefore, all that you are really doing is exciting your dog.

If your dog is excited, do not acknowledge it by yelling commands above the barking. Let me translate a typical daily situation as your dog views it: Your dog is barking and running around. You give a command to sit, yelling loudly to make sure your dog hears you above his own barking. Dog translation? *Oh good! We are playing who can bark the loudest! I’ll bet I can win! Listen to this: BARK! BARK! BARK! I’ll bark even louder! This is so exciting I have to jump around too! Wow, my person is barking even louder now! I’d better bark louder, too!*

You can use a high-pitched voice for praise, but even then, you don't want to overexcite your dog. If you are trying to instill calmness, do not use your voice for praise. Instead, use your hands as positive reinforcement. Dogs do not cheer aloud when another responds to a body gesture; they simply indicate by their attitude and actions that the acceptable behavior is in progress. While some dogs do require verbal praise as encouragement when training, many dogs become too excited when praised and try to match their owner's voice excitement with either barking or jumping. A simple pat or touch from you, the handler, is all that is needed most of the time.

Mistake #3: Sweet-talking Your Dog

You come home and your dog greets you by barking and jumping on you. Your reaction is to try to calm him by petting and talking to him. You say (while petting him): "Good boy, be quiet now. . . settle down. . . settle down. . . good boy." Dog translation? *My person must LOVE my barking and jumping because he gives me so much attention when I do it! Yay! I'll bark and jump some more!*

Petting and talking to your dog while he is jumping and barking is counterproductive. Your actions and words are rewarding a behavior you want your dog to stop.

How should you respond to your dog jumping on you? Respond as an Alpha dog would. Stand tall with your eyes facing the ceiling; turn your back towards him if he is jumping towards your face. Make no eye contact and say nothing; if your dog continues (and he probably will, because his previous experience has taught him that you will give in) correct him using the leash. If your dog is not wearing a collar (and why isn't he with that kind of behavior?) slip the leash over the dog's head in a loop and correct. If he is wearing his collar (good for you) quickly attach the leash to the collar and correct.

When your dog is finally calmly sitting, simply walk away from him and do not pet or praise. Remember, the Alpha dog will walk away and go about his business. You should do the same. Keep the leash in your hands as you walk away. If your dog jumps on you as you turn your back to leave him, correct quickly and firmly. This correction should be meaningful enough to make your dog lay down in submission.

Conclusion

Being the Alpha, or the dominant pack leader, does not depend on size or physical strength. The pack leader is the strongest in his own head. When pack members are over-excited or out of control, the leader brings them under control by communicating through posture, attitude, and, when necessary, a swift and effective correction. The pack leader remains calm and confident and rarely vocalizes.

In order to communicate leadership when your dog is out of control, you must take your cues from the way a canine pack leader reacts and interacts with his pack. You must behave this way 100% of the time—*especially* when your dog is jumping and barking. Your dog will behave consistently when he realizes that you have consistent expectations and that there will be consistent consequences for

misbehavior. Do not give up! Speak your dog's language and be the leader your dog needs you to be. Through clear communication, you can calm the chaos.

About Beth Bradley

Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at age 12. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. She is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training CDs and DVDs Beth competes with her own dogs in Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. She holds national and international titles, championships, and honors, including representing the United States in the FCI World Trials in both 2003 and 2009. Beth consults for New Jersey shelters and New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament. In addition, she trains and handles dogs for movies and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Blue Bloods*, and *The Good Wife*.

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