

Greetings from the Dog

Did you know that in Denmark, if you are still single by the age of 25, your family and friends will splash you with water and cover you from head to toe with cinnamon? Or in India it's good luck to be hit over the head with a coconut? Everyone has heard about strange customs at some point, but imagine if you're a dog and you're trying to understand human customs?

Dogs like to greet each other by licking one end and sniffing the other. Humans don't. Humans like to greet each other by shaking hands or hugging. This isn't natural for dogs, so we have to teach them how to appropriately greet humans. And, with humans, there are differences between how they need to greet various people. For example, a wagging tail can send a toddler flying and a big sloppy kiss may not be appreciated by Grandma.

As a parent, either to dogs or humans, you spend a great deal of time indoctrinating them to the ways of the world. You taught your children the appropriate way to meet people, and you need to teach your dog the same lessons. If you don't teach them how to appropriately greet people, they're going to try and figure it out themselves. Just because they decide that jumping up on the person and trying to lick their face or grab someone's hand and try and pull them to the couch doesn't mean that your dog is aggressive. It means that they're excited and can barely contain themselves. As humans, we experience that joy when someone we love comes into the house, but we learn to temper that with manners as we get older.

Some dogs are very mouthy. They've been designed to be mouthy. Retrievers, specifically, were designed to enjoy holding things, even dead ducks, in their mouths. My shepherd gets excited when I get home and grabs my hand and pulls me to the couch because she wants to catch up on our day. Dogs use their mouths because they don't have opposable thumbs. If a dog could grab a hand with her paw and pull you to the couch, she would. But she can't, so she uses her mouth.

It's not unusual for people to say that dog teeth should never be on human skin. But that is a misgeneralization. Did you know that when a dog grooms you it's one of the most respectful things that he can do to you? That little nibbling of their front teeth up and down your arm hurts, but it's the biggest compliment your pup can give you. You're his pack and he's grooming you - he loves you. And, my dog bringing me to the couch? She's not being aggressive, maybe a bit bossy, but not aggressive. You have to understand their actions in context with their intention.

Training your dog how you want to be treated when you come into the house, and how you don't want to be treated is the only way to ensure that your dog understands what you want. Dogs don't automatically understand what they should be doing in every situation. You, as the human, have to be the one that tells them what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. And, you have to make sure that whatever you tell them is specific to your environment.

Your dog will want to fit in and do what is expected. Imagine that you find your single self in Denmark on your 25th birthday. You probably don't expect to be doing an impersonation of a cinnamon roll, but, if that's what other people expect of you, that's what you do!

Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022.