

## Human-Canine Communication: Tone vs. Volume

Sometimes it's not what we say, but how we say it that resonates in interpersonal communications. Nonverbal cues are essential to effective communication with other people, and the same also holds true when communicating with our dogs.

### What does my dog hear when I speak to him?

Before he learns word associations, your dog hears "yadda, yadda, yadda" when you speak to him. It's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it that sends him the desired message. If your tone reflects pleasure, love, sadness, disappointment, or worry, your dog will pick up on it. If your volume changes from soft to loud, he'll pick up on that, too. Dogs respond to certain intonations and volumes, regardless of what is being said.



For example, if you speak at a regular volume, then suddenly shout, your dog will know that something's up and he should pay attention. Similarly, your dog detects tonal changes from happy to demanding or sad to cheerful.

### What volumes and tones can a dog distinguish?

Distinguishing volume is fairly simple for people and dogs alike. You can whisper, speak softly, talk at a conversational volume, or outright shout! The differences in intonation are a little more subtle.

There are five common distinguishing tones used in dog training. Here's what your dog understands when you change your tone of voice.

1. **Cheerful** (high volume, high pitch) – Cheerful tones often sound silly and playful. Speaking to your dog in a cheerful voice will tell him that you are proud of his behavior or want to play. Your dog may respond by perking his ears or wagging his tail. And he will learn to associate a particular behavior with a happy owner. "Good dog!" will tell him he really did "good" when he fetched the morning paper.
2. **Disappointed** (low volume, low pitch) – This tone of voice commands attention, especially when accompanied by a frown and tells your dog that you disapprove of a particular behavior. Your dog may respond by lowering his head and tail. Likewise, he'll soon learn that "Not nice" means he shouldn't chew your slippers.
3. **Soft and reassuring** (low volume, high pitch) – A soothing tone of voice expresses affection and caring and is often used when bonding with your dog. Think of how you talk when trying to comfort a baby and you'll have this tone down pat. Saying "Sweet pup" when petting your dog tells him that you really love him.

**"A soothing tone of voice expresses affection and caring and is often used when bonding with your dog."**

1. **Firm**(low volume and low pitch) Commands or corrections given with a firm tone get a dog's attention. Even though you are still your dog's best friend, he respects this tone of voice and realizes that he'd better listen now! If you say, "Stay", he should do just that.
2. **Caution** - (high volume and high or low pitch) When faced with a dangerous situation, a sudden command will get your dog's immediate attention. Use this tone only in emergencies when you want your dog to stop in his tracks. If you overuse this tone, it loses its effect. When approaching traffic, your dog should freeze when you shout, "Stop!"

## Why is vocal communication so important?

Pet parents want their dogs to mind them. The advantage of verbal communication is that your dog doesn't have to see you to know what you want of him. This is critical in times of emergency when your dog may not be facing you, but needs to heed an important command.

Good verbal communication also allows you to control your dog when you can't see him. A quick call out the back door should produce a dog running toward the sound of your voice.

Voice commands also cross the size barrier and allow a tiny person to control an enormous dog. Even young children can feel confidently in control when utilizing proper vocal tone and volume.

## Does gender matter when it comes to vocal commands?

The differences in human tones and volumes affect how dogs respond to their owners. Men often have lower pitches that sound firm and commanding. They may have to consciously raise their pitch to communicate a positive message. Women and children, on the other hand, often have to lower the tone of their voice and raise the volume to sound firm and authoritative.

Regardless of gender or age, all pet parents should be ready to back up their words with actions, i.e., a hug to show when you're pleased or proud and a straight upright posture when you need to show that you are boss!

## How do I create word associations for my dog?

More thorough understanding of human communication takes a while. Dogs initially respond to tone and volume, but eventually, our canine pals recognize actual words. If you say, "Treat" before grabbing a dog biscuit, your faithful companion will learn to run to the pantry when he hears that word. Along with tone and volume, word associations enhance our ability to communicate with our dogs.

The trick is to use the right words. Having a separate vocabulary for doggie talk will avoid confusion. For example, I tell my dog "OK" after I fill his food bowl to indicate that it's time for him to eat. If he hears me say "OK" during a phone conversation he runs to an empty food bowl and wonders what went wrong. Guess I should have picked a better word!

Using unique words avoids confusion, but it's best not to get overly creative. If you speak your own personal language, no one else will be able to communicate with your dog. Not good if he's darting into the street and the neighbor yells "Sit!" but your dog only sits when he hears "Take a seat".

**"It's also important to utter a request just once."**

It's also important to utter a request just once. If you say, "Come, come, come", your dog may respond only when he hears the third, "Come". In other words, "Come" means nothing, but "Come, come, come" means get over here! Say it once, and give your dog time to respond.

Training a dog to understand human communications is easier when we consider how our tone and volume influence our message. Just remember, it's not just what you say....it's how you say it.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM*

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