



How to use words and tone of voice when training your dog.

Dogs DO understand words – that has been scientifically proven – but like us learning a foreign language, they don't understand them until they are taught.

Say "Sit" to a dog and it has no idea. But if you teach him to put his rump on the ground and associate the word "Sit" with the action, he learns that this word means do this and later when you say "Sit", he will sit. Now you could use the word "Banana" to teach him to sit, "table" to shake hands etc and he will associate those words with the actions. But what happens if your dog runs away or has to be rehomed or spends the night at the vet or the kennel. You will have a perfectly trained dog that no one can communicate with. So when training your dog, don't get too fancy or funny, use the basics and use one word commands only.

Dogs will learn what individual words mean but they also listen to the tone of your voice. I often say to my dog "You're bad!" and he wiggles and wags his tail because the tone is soft and friendly and he is often getting a pat at the same time. It's obviously not a harsh situation and he reacts in a non threatened manner. However if I say "you're BAD!" in a louder, deeper sterner voice then he knows he is in trouble.

The "Come" exercise is an important one for tone of voice. "Come" must NEVER be used for punishment. If your dog is doing something bad and you call them and then punish them, they will never come when called again because they relate the punishment to the "Come" and not to what they were otherwise doing. Regardless of what your dog just did, "Come" must always be followed by lots of praise. (If you are going to punish them for an action, then you go to them and punish them on the spot.) Also watch your tone of voice ... if you say "COME" in a booming deep voice, the dog will think 'holy hell' and not come near you. Use a strong command that will carry to them but make it non- threatening and in a lighter tone of voice to help encourage the dog to come.

My dog saw a cat one night and took off after it. The whole thing happened so fast I didn't have a chance to stop him. He hit the gate and popped it open, ran across the street in front of a truck and kept going after the cat while I was standing there with my mouth open. When the truck passed and I started breathing again, I saw Rafe coming back towards me. The road was now clear

so I called him to “Come” and he did a very nice recall. After that I told him he was a mongrel ratbag and I was gonna kill him and never let him off lead again so I could kick him if he misbehaved and he wagged and wiggled because it was all said in a light friendly tone of voice and he was happy because he came and got what he considered to be a lot of praise. I could have destroyed his recall there and then because I had been badly scared by his running away. If I had yelled at him and punished him and he would never have come when called again.

Make sure you suit the tone to the exercise! Some exercises need a serious commanding tone – like “Stay” or “Leave” – so they realize there is no playing around here, we mean business. Others need a light, happy tone to perk their interest and get them eager to move – like “Heel” or “Come” or “Fetch”. Think about what is required by the exercise you want the dog to do and adjust your tone accordingly.

And also stress your pronunciation especially when they are learning. Don’t say “Si” and drop the ‘T’ because that is now another word. Say “SiT”, “StanD” and “DroP” is a good one. Speak clearly to your dog so it is easier for them to learn what you are saying. The sibilant “SSS” is a dominant sound and can overpower the other letters in a word. “Sit”, “Stand” and “Stay” all sound fairly similar so make sure you pronounce the whole word so they know which exercise you want them to do.

One of my obedience instructors like to say, “Set your dog up for success”. Give them every chance to do it right the first time. And if they do it wrong, consider why and maybe it was your fault and not theirs.