

Why Speak Softly To Our Dogs?

Robert K. Anderson DVM

Companion dogs are a joy when they respond to the wishes and desires of the people in their lives, but become a source of frustration and even anger when they fail to obey one or more members of the household. One of the most common frustrations is failure or slowness to respond to voice commands such as come or sit or down. This is often at times when the dog is in danger of injury from traffic or being lost or when we want the dog to stop unwanted behavior or come into the house.

We laugh at the cartoons which picture the dog waiting until the person's voice becomes so loud and authoritative that the dog finally obeys because the loudness of the voice signifies that the person "Really Means It". Most of us enjoy seeing someone else trying to get attention and control by speaking in a loud voice, even shouting and yelling, as if the dog's hearing were impaired. But many dog owners would like to know if it is necessary to increase the loudness of their voices or use a deeper, more authoritative voice or shout at their dogs to get immediate attention and eager responses.

The answers: a) it is not necessary; b) it is difficult for many people, particularly some women and children to speak in a louder, deeper, more authoritative voice; c) and it unnecessarily emphasizes age and gender related differences among people which may adversely influence a dog's response to voice control.

What is the evidence?

If it is not necessary to speak loudly and authoritatively for dogs to hear and respond promptly to voice control, the next questions to ask is: "Can normal dogs hear well enough to respond quickly to a voice command given by people who speak in a soft voice?" Based on our knowledge of physiology and audiology, the answer is yes, if the dog is within an average size house or yard.

What is the practical evidence? From any room in the house most dogs can hear the soft sound of a cupboard or refrigerator door opening in the kitchen where food or treats are kept and they respond quickly and eagerly to those rather faint sounds. Most dogs will also respond quickly and eagerly to the slight, crinkly sounds of opening a package of food or a treat.

Additional practical evidence is provided by answering the question: "How far away can your dog detect your car before it arrives in the driveway of your home?" Most dog owners say their dog will be "alert" to the sound of a particular car, usually driven by master or mistress, when the car is up to half a block away, but will ignore usual traffic on the street. Yes, a dog's hearing is excellent, but the dog is selective in responding.

Turn on the charm

These examples show that most dogs' hearing is excellent. The problem is not the dog's ability to hear soft commands, it is the dog's motivation to respond to a person's command.

If dogs hear so well, why do so many people believe it is necessary to speak in a macho voice--loud, firm and authoritative--to have a dog respond promptly and repeatedly to obedience commands? Perhaps it is based on the most common recommendations, that to increase the frequency and promptness of our dog's response to a command, people should use a deeper tone of voice and increase the tone of authority; increase the loudness of the voice, up to shouting or yelling, as the command is repeated until the dog responds.

These instructions have worked for centuries because dogs in nature do respond to authority of a pack leader, usually a male dog with a deep authoritative voice who is bigger and stronger than the others and is capable of enforcing this leadership with painful punishment. In many training situations, people use these instinctive responses to teach a dog to obey commands by using a deep, authoritative and commanding voice to simulate a pack leader in nature. But, it is not necessary to do this and there are excellent alternatives for training a dog to respond eagerly to people with soft voices.

Authority rules

It is common in family situations for dogs to obey most frequently the deeper, louder voice of most men, obey less frequently the higher tone and softer voices of most women and obey infrequently the high tone and less authoritative voice of most children. It is also common for people not to enforce prompt response to voice commands and so the dog often waits to obey until the person's voice becomes increasingly loud to signify, "Now I really mean it." Thus, both dogs and people perpetuate the myth that dogs cannot hear soft voices or do not respond promptly.

Unfortunately, dogs respond less well to many women and to most children. This lack of control frequently leads to unwanted behavior which often results in removal of dogs from households and loss of companionship for people.

Keep it soft

Our training methods include teaching every person in the household to use similar voices, soft in tone and low in volume. This teaches dogs to respond equally well, eagerly and quickly, to similar soft voices whether they are children, grandparents, women or men. It is relatively easy for all people to speak softly, but it is difficult for most children and women to speak loudly and in a deep authoritative voice. When all members of the household, including men, speak in similar soft voices, it helps to provide equality for all members to be leaders in the mind of the dog.

Our training methods also include teaching people to use motivation--using attention and sometimes food--to help teach dogs to respond quickly and eagerly to soft voices. Positive rewards motivate dogs to eagerly obey and help to provide equality for all household members to be leaders in the mind of the dog, regardless of strength, gender or age of the person.

Make people equal

No need to have a deep authoritative voice or speak loudly or shout. No need to be a macho, commanding figure. No need to have a hierarchy or "pecking order" among people.

With appropriate motivation, with use of the behavior management and with all people in the household using an equally soft voice, every person can be equal as a leader and dogs will have longer lives to provide that special companionship to caring people.

© 1990 Robert K. Anderson DVM
Reprinted with permission
Animal Humans Society
Golden Valley, Minnesota