



DOG TRAINING SOLUTIONS

Licking: affectionate, disconcerting, or just plain disgusting?

For us humans, it can be a bit difficult to identify with the doggie habit of licking one another in greeting. We don't do it, after all, and though our tongues come in handy for things like ice-cream eating and sucking that last dollop of peanut butter off the knife, we certainly wouldn't welcome a visitor into our home by giving them a long, lingering lick on the cheek (unless you were brought up to embrace certain social mores currently unheard of in Western society).

Dogs use their tongues to explore the world. A dog's tongue is as important (and useful) to him as our eyes and hands are to us: it's a multi-purpose utility tool, used to taste things, explore the presence of new people and animals, express submissiveness, and to let you know that he values your companionship and friendship.

Licking is a completely natural behaviour for dogs, and most of the time, the experience isn't something to worry about: the odd lick from a warm, moist tongue on your hand or ankle is, at worst, tolerable (and, I must admit, I actually find it pretty adorable when my dog licks me – but then again, he's trained not to overdo it, so I don't have to worry about the smothering capacities that a 100-pound male Rottweiler's tongue possesses!)

Some dogs just take things too far though, and this is where problems can set in. It's not pleasant to be persecuted in your own home by a far-reaching, agile, mobile, and slobbery tongue: some won't let you get a moment's rest, but will pursue you from bedroom to hallway to lounge to kitchen, making sporadic dive-bombings of affection on your toes, ankles, calves – anywhere that flesh is exposed and available. And for a tall dog, the available terrain is much more varied, and thus, enticing – ever had a long, wet dog's tongue lathering your bellybutton as you stretch up to those elusive top shelves? When unexpected, the resultant shock is more than a trifle unbalancing!

Plenty of dogs won't restrict themselves to your skin alone, either, and owners of these dogs will attest to the always-visible consistency of dog saliva on clothing: whether your outfit is black, white, or any of the myriads of shades in between, there's nothing like a viscous patch of dog slobber on a freshly-laundered hemline to advertise your ownership status (and your dog's personal level of demonstrativeness) to the world at large. And once it's dried, it's there 'til the next laundry run: the physical evidence of a dog's friendship is like egg white. It's there, it's dried on, and it's not coming off until a combination of suds, hot water, and vigorous effort is applied.

And all this because your dog wants to say "I love you"!

But there's often a bit more to it than just plain affection. As with all animal behaviour, the logic behind licking is usually more complex and subtle than you might think, and the same gesture can have multiple meanings dependent on circumstance, your dog's state of mind, and the other behaviours being exhibited at the same time. So, although we can postulate until the cows come home (or until your dog stops licking – whichever comes first) as to why your dog's licking you, such generalizations aren't always 100% accurate: it's partly up to you to determine the reasoning behind the actions. And, since you know your dog better than anyone else, you're the ideal candidate for the job.

If your dog is licking you because he's feeling affectionate and wants to let you know, it'll be pretty easy to figure out whether this is the case or not. His body language will be relaxed, and although the circumstances will be variable, the surrounding mood will generally be stress-free and happy: for example, when he licks you on the shoulder or ear from his vantage-point in the backseat as you're driving him to the park, or lathers your hands and wrists with goodwill and devotion when you return home from a hard day at the office. "Puppy love" is by far the most common cause of licking: it isn't anything to worry about, and it's simple to 'cure' him of the habit if the behaviour is a problem for you. (We'll get to that further down the page.)

Another not-infrequent reason for repetitive, owner-targeted licking is that your dog's feeling anxious and stressed. If there are things happening in your dog's life to cause him unhappiness or tension, he'll often show it through obsessive-compulsive behaviours, and licking is a pretty common manifestation of these. Some dogs will lick themselves, others will lick you – it's really a case of individual preference.

It shouldn't be too hard for you to pinpoint the cause of your dog's less-than-relaxed mindset: is he getting enough attention and mental stimulation, or is he cooped up inside for long hours each day by himself? Does he get enough exercise and outdoors time for sniffing, exploration, and general exuberant tomfoolery? Do you pay him lots of attention when you're at home, or tend to greet him hurriedly before rushing off to your next commitment?

These are all things that you'll need to consider, before adapting your lifestyle to address the issue accordingly. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the licking, and the overall quality of your dog's life, you may need to make some general adjustments of your own to ensure that, when the licking does stop, it's because you've treated the cause, not the symptoms – otherwise, you're just trying to take away a valuable outlet for his negative emotions, which is unrealistic (and unfair on your friend, too).

Perhaps you need to come home more often during the day. Perhaps you need to get up half an hour earlier in the morning to give him a more substantial pre-work walk (it varies from dog to dog, but as a general rule of thumb, most dogs function best and are at their most relaxed with an hour and a half's exercise each day). Or maybe you just need to spend more time with him in the evenings, playing, grooming, training, and just hanging out together.

Make sure you're paying attention to his demeanour (does he seem content?) and his activity levels before you try to get rid of the licking behaviour as a stand-alone problem: even though he can't talk, he can still use his tongue to try and tell you something, and this might be what's happening here.

Having said that though, most of the time excessive licking is simply due to excessive exuberance in your dog: he's happy, he loves you, and he has to let you know right now.

When you want to get the point across that his licking's getting a bit too much for you, a simple change in your body language will convey your message loud and clear. All you need to do is withdraw the outward display of your affection for him to understand that, actually, you don't like it when he covers your skin in a composite of saliva, dog-food particulate matter, scraps of debris from his fur, and general oral-cavity detritus.

In plain English, this means that you just have to turn yourself away from him: when he starts to lick, get up and move away instantly. Make sure your face and eyes are dramatically averted from him: face in the complete opposite direction. Preface this with a revolted-sounding "No!" if you like (I say "No lick!" but you can use whatever comes

naturally. Just keep the phrase short and easily identifiable so your dog quickly learns to recognize it).

At this point, he'll probably get up and follow you. Wait for him to do so: the licking should start again soon.

When it does, repeat the process. Withdraw all signs of affection from him again: turn away, get up and leave, and don't pay him any attention or talk to him (apart from another "No!" in a disgusted, I-can't-believe-you-haven't-got-the-message-yet tone of voice).

It's likely that your dog will be persistent. He's not to be easily deterred; you're the undisputed centrepiece of his life, after all, and he needs to let you know this whenever the opportunity should present itself. You just need to outmatch him in persistency. Be consistent with your actions, and the message will sink in.

Don't feel that you have to shout or react negatively - the simple withdrawal of your love (or the appearance of this, anyway) is quite enough.

A word of warning: some people really like it when dogs lick them, even if the dog concerned is not their own. If visitors to your house (or admiring passers-by on the street) greet your dog and allow him to lick them, you'll need to intervene or else they'll undo all your good work. It's best if you can explain ahead of time that you're training him not to lick, and then explain the appropriate response for them to take if he should start to lick them. This way, you can be sure that your dog's not going to be corrupted into unwanted behaviours again – and that he'll learn to express his affection in other, more desirable ways.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON LICKING AND OTHER PROBLEMATIC DOG BEHAVIOURS ...

You'll probably want to check out SitStayFetch. It's a comprehensive, A-Z manual for the responsible dog owner, and deals with just about every canine behaviour and training technique under the sun, from aggression to digging to whining to dog whispering to obedience work.

You can visit the SitStayFetch site by clicking on the link below:

<http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/?aff=cbdtol608&type=nohop>