


Your Dog Is a Logician

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Pam Hogle

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Guest Post by Deni Elliott

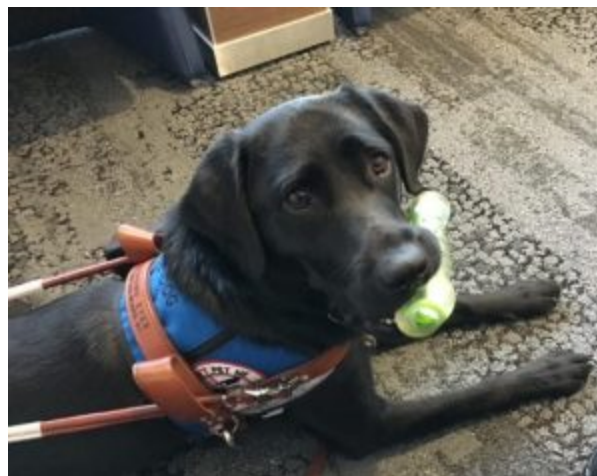
Guiding Eyes Koala and I have few conflicts, but those that we have get tiresome for the person-side of the partnership. Licking. Koala is a licky dog. I don't like to be licked. I think I have found a solution to the licking conflict and realized something more about canine language comprehension.

I'm not unreasonable. A quick kiss now and again is appreciated and fair exchange for an ear scratch or a snuggle. But, spare me what became a nightly routine: The enthusiastic leap when I invite Koala to come up on the people bed for a cuddle, ending with her upper body on my chest and nose at my chin. "Oh, you let me up on the bed!" her body language says. LICK. LICK. LICK. "I'm so happy to be up here!" Rapid tail wag. LICK. LICK. LICK. "I'm such a lucky dog!" LICK LICK LICK. My plaintive, "Enough!" or commanding, "Off the bed!" ended the licking, but ignored Koala and her intent. This was not how I wanted to end the day with my canine partner.

Recently, I invited her up on the bed and, as she came close to my face, I calmly and nicely said, "If you lick, you'll need to get off the bed." Koala stopped. She lay down next to me with more restraint than usual, nose close to my chin. Her tongue slowly reached out to touch my face. Again, I said, "If you lick, you'll need to get off the bed."

She stopped. Sighed. Relaxed against my side so that I could stroke her head. Soon she shifted to her back so that I could rub her belly. No licking, just a peaceful, happy dog. A few minutes later, I said that it was time for her to go to her own bed, which she did without protest and without being rejected. I heard Koala settle down on her dog bed next to her Golden Retriever sister and thought about why my warning worked.

Conditional reasoning starts with compound sentences that use "If, then." Dogs know the "if, then" construction. Sometimes the conditional is time, such as when Pam says, "We'll go for a walk, and then I'll give you dinner." Koala and Cali know the concepts of "walk" and "dinner," but on hearing this sentence, they head for the door, not the dinner bowls. More often the conditional is action: "If you get the paper, then I'll give you a cookie," "If you sit quietly for a few minutes, you'll get your dinner," "If you come here, then I'll rub your ears the



Koala loves to cuddle

way that you like.” The “if, then” condition sets up a trust relationship between dog and human. Dogs that stop coming when called do so because they think that their humans have fallen down on their part of what should happen when they obey.

Koala’s understanding of the “if, then” connection when I said, “If you lick, you’ll need to get off the bed,” was even more complex. This sentence had a condition — If you lick — but a negative consequence. Koala needed to turn the sentence around to reason, “I don’t want to get off the bed, so I better not lick.”

And even more complicated was her realization that she’d have to get off the bed in a few minutes anyway to go to her own bed and that that part of the nighttime routine was not a punishment. The question was whether she could control her licking so that she got a cuddle on the people bed for a few minutes first.

Koala’s success was evidence for her ability to master human language and what is implied by what her people say. Its mastery that all of our dogs are capable of achieving. The limitation is with us humans, who often fail to see how asking our dogs to use their conceptual abilities can make life easier for both humans and canines.