

April 23, 2018



Why Does My Dog's Hearing Come And Go?

Dear Oona, I know others have mentioned this but since you're answering, I thought I'd ask. Why is it that Brion and Aoife can't hear me telling them not to do something when they're standing right beside me, but they can hear me sneaking a snack from any corner of our four acres? Thanks Oona!

— Barbara

Dear Barbara: Well, you know, dogs *do* have superpowers, so you can be pretty sure that Brion and Aoife heard you loud and clear. They're just using selective hearing, or, to put it another

way, what's in it for them?

We hear sounds twice as high and low on the frequency spectrum as humans do, and we can hear a sound four times farther away than you can. Plus, our ears have 18 more muscles than human ears do to aim at sounds and scoop them from the air. We hear you jussst fiiiine.

Sometimes we hear a little *too* well. We're stuck in the human world with all its bells and sirens, televisions, blenders and ice machines. As best we can, we tune it out and just trust you're not going to blow the place up. We just let humans do what you're good at — thinking up quirky stuff, flexing those thumbs and opening cans of dog food — and we do what dogs are best at — watching our for ourselves.

Let's be frank. We do have to watch out for ourselves because of human lapses. Think what a world it'd be if we were free to just be dogs and do what we wanted all the time. Steak at every meal! Why, we could trot outside whenever we wanted day or night, do our business, visit the dogs next door, trot around the block, howl at the moon, and investigate every trash can....but no. We have to rely on you to open the door and fill our bowls, which is pretty frustrating.

Sometimes we don't want to bother you. We just take matters into our own paws. Sometimes you call this being "naughty." You say "toMAHto," we say "squirrel!"

As much as we love you guys, as tightly as we're bonded, our ways are not your ways. This is where you bring in all your "training" malarky. You try to teach us The Rules. We try to figure out how to be left alone and hang onto a shred of dignity.

You jabber and point and wave around the treats. We learn a few of those sounds you make just to keep you happy. But most of the time? All those sounds are just baffling. Most dogs can only figure out and remember about 300 of your words. And you just keep making them all day long. So, yeah, we tune you out.

Treats put things right back into focus. A lot of treats make things *really* clear. So, yeah, keep talking. And we'll keep on struggling to decipher your gibberish. Treats! Now we're talking! Suddenly, life has meaning again!

Still, when it comes to doing what you say, things can go in the ditch for a lot of reasons. You may think you've trained us to "sit" and "stay" every time you simply utter those words. But *we* might think we're getting a treat for sitting and staying every time you face us, lean forward and make a face and jabber. It's a precise ritual to us. Leave part of it out and we can claim we were just confused. And then we go on doing what we want.

Lucky for you, we're wolfhounds. Wolfhounds as much as any other breed learn to read their humans. You say we're "almost human." We forgive you. And keep studying your face and your eyes so we know what you really want without paying much attention to those monkey sounds.

Some of stuff you trained us to do as eager, adoring puppies just goes completely out the window when we're teenagers. A young brain can just hold so much, right? Then it flushes some things in what your scientists call "synaptic pruning." (There go two *more* words I'll never use again) We lose what we don't think we need. Like the meaning of pointless sounds like "sit" and "stay" and "spit out the cat."

So, yes, you have to retrain us, or keep our training up until we're mature and our brains settle down quit flushing all those nonessentials.

Once we *both* know that you know that we know what you're saying...there's still that question of motivation. Is that little treat you have there better than not eating the cat? Is a pinch of cheese more rewarding than scarfing down a Boston butt? What's in it for us? Because, at the end of the day, we're wolfhounds. And you're not.

This whole command and obey thing of yours is foreign to dogs. I know some of you believe in alpha dogs, but have you ever *seen* one dog wave its paw and the other creep away to do his bidding? Some dogs are smarter. Some dogs are bigger and meaner. Some dogs are just nuts. But there *is* no Grand Poohbah in a dog pack. Now and then there's a clear leader, but it's not a title for life. Spill a can of tuna and watch the rest of us scramble right over him to get to it.

But we do have wolfhound manners, we love you and we try to cooperate. Within reason. If you want more, you have to clearly show us, reward us with high-value treats (think bacon or cheese) when we do it, and do this a few gazillion times every day for several weeks and then it might become habit. Or, you know, maybe not. We're wolfhounds. We might just look at you one day and say, "You go on without me. I'm heading for the couch."

—Oona

Got a question? Send it to bob@thewildstare.com. Oona will get back to you as soon as she gets her nails done or she can prod

the old guy to take dictation.