

Use of Voice, Touch, and Body Language in Handling Animals

Our topics for this week are::

- **Effective use of voice commands for handling animals**
- **Animal detection of body language**
- **Proper use of touch to control an animal's movement**

Voice

Animal restraint begins with the handler's voice or body language. Animals like to hear a handler's voice, if it is soothing and has rhythmic tones. Soothing talk is not characteristic of a predator or a challenge for social dominance. Voice can be used to direct an animal's movement, gain its attention, or reprimand its misbehavior. An instructional voice has a lower pitch and is slightly louder and shorter than a soothing voice. A commanding or reprimanding voice is deeper and with conviction, but shouting, screaming, or high-pitched sounds should be avoided in all cases.

Body Language

Animals use body language to a greater extent than any other means of communication. For example, dogs "play bow" to signal desire to play through body language. A play face is one with an open mouth, erect ears, and wagging tail. The dog will bark while advancing and retreating with bouncing movements.

Animals can detect human body language that is imperceptible to humans. Some animals are especially sensitive to human facial expressions and other body language. An Orlov Trotter horse in Germany, named Clever Hans, was famous for this in the early 1900s. He appeared able to perform arithmetic and other mental tasks by reading subtle human body language. In recognition of his abilities, the observer-effect is also referred to as the Clever Hans effect. In the 1930s, a Lewellin setter in Missouri, Jim the Wonder Dog, was capable of similar feats. The Clever Hans effect may be what enables some animals to detect early signs of hypoglycemia in diabetics and impending seizures in epileptic humans rather than detecting some unknown odor as postulated in the past.

A handler's body language needs to be coordinated with the voice characteristics or the animal will become confused. Non-threatening body language includes keeping the arms down and close to the body with palms toward the thighs. Raising the arms is threatening, but can be used to drive animals in a desired direction. An erect posture is less threatening than slumped shoulders or rounded back which simulates a pouncing and threatening posture. A glancing gaze or indirect stare is less threatening than a direct stare. Staring particularly at an animal's eyes is threatening to prey animals and social dominance-challenging to carnivores. For example, directly staring at a strange dog will motivate either an effort from the dog to escape or become aggressive. Moderately rapid, rhythmic normal movements are less threatening than rapid, jerky, or slow, creeping actions.

Touch

Touch can readily convey handler confidence and intentions to an animal being handled. Excessively light touch or stroking does this poorly, causing signs of apprehension in most animals. Moderately firm, deliberate gentle touch conveys more confidence and is less threatening than very light touch or stroking. Touching should be done with fingers together and applied with either the palm side or the back of the hand. Touching with the tips of the fingers while the fingers are spread or with the end of the thumb is less well tolerated. This type of touch is more likely to cause the animal to move the touched area away which can be helpful in positioning large animals. Using spread finger tips or the end of the thumb can be a much more useful means of moving a horse in a desired direction than pushing with a flat hand. Very firm, pushy, or slapping-type touches may be perceived as a challenge to social position in the herd or pack or a reprimand for misbehavior. However, this does not mean a handler should never pat large animals that they need to be close to. For example, it can be beneficial for handlers to desensitize horses to moderate slaps to prevent flight reactions if tack or clothing accidentally slaps them while mounting or riding or if the handler or rider needs to slap a biting fly, especially horseflies.

The shoulders of mammals are not densely innervated by touch receptors and this is not a location that fatal injuries can be inflicted. As a result, animals tolerate touch on the shoulders more easily than touch around the more vulnerable areas such as the eyes, ears, throat, belly, or legs.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Loud, high-pitched sounds should not be used when handling animals.**

- 2. Animals should not receive a direct stare except to initiate movement away from the handler or aggression toward the handler.**
- 3. Animals, particularly horses and dogs, can detect slight changes body language imperceptible to humans.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.