But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Do dogs understand human words?

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Jane 00:20
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we get questions from curious kids all over the world, and we find really cool people who can offer answers. We're doing things a little bit differently today, though, because we, although they're very quiet at the moment, have a live audience here with us at Vermont Public. Can you say hi so they know I'm not lying? See, I knew you were here, and you're still awake. This is part of Curious Kids Day at Vermont Public, and all of you are here today to learn more about Vermont Public, and to be part of this live audience who gets to ask the questions. The theme today for our whole thing is dogs. So, can you guess what our episode is going to be about? Dogs. Very good. Yep. It would be really weird if we did cats, right? And so we're going to have you ask some questions. But before we get to your questions, you're probably not even paying attention to me because there is a dog in a tutu right next to me, and there's also a human. But you know, whatever. But the the human and the dog both are important, are Penelope and Evan? Hi, Evan, and hi, Penelope. Thank you for being with us.

Evan 01:40
Thank you. Thank you so much for having us.

Jane 01:41
Penelope is in the way of the microphone, even.

Evan 01:43
Can you move, please? Okay, good girl. Thank you, Penelope.

Jane 01:49
Evan, the kids who are here today can see Penelope, and as I said, she's wearing a tutu. But the kids who are listening to the episode don't know what Penelope looks like. Can you describe her?

Evan 01:59
She is a very large dog. She weighs about 110 pounds. She is black and white with some spots. She looks kind of like a cow. Some people have said she looks like an Oreo on one side, but the other side of her is white. One side is mostly black and white. So depending upon what side you look at, she could be two different dogs.

Jane 02:23
110 pounds is a really big dog.

Evan 02:25

Yes, and lots of hair, very long hair, and she sheds a lot. I'm sure everybody here is going home with a little bit of Penelope on them.

Jane 02:34
You and Penelope are a therapy dog team with Therapy Dogs of Vermont. What does a therapy dog do?

Evan 02:41
A therapy dog basically is a dog that allows people to just be a little bit happier in their daily lives. Therapy dog teams go to many different places. Penelope and I primarily go to schools. There are teams that go to hospitals, teams that go to nursing homes. We have teams that go to prisons. I've gone to summer camps. I have gone to funerals. We also have teams that are doing crisis response work and respond when there's a community crisis.

Jane 03:13
Why does having Penelope in a school or another setting make people feel good?

Evan 03:19
Let's face it. Everybody loves seeing a dog in a school. It brings a smile to the kids who we meet with. Brings a smile to the kids who just see us walking down the hall. We've worked with kids who have some suffered some really severe tragedies and losses. Also, we sometimes just meet with kids who are having a really rough day and just need 15 minutes away to decompress and just get back on their game.

Jane 03:45
Sometimes therapy dogs that work in schools or libraries are great reading companions too. And I don't mean that the dog reads, but sometimes it's easier to read out loud to a dog because they like all of the books that you read and they don't mind how long it takes.

Evan 03:59
And they don't judge. They don't say, "Oh, you should know how to read already." They don't. They just want to be around you, and they want to listen to the kids talk.

Jane 04:07
How did you know Penelope would be a good therapy dog?

Evan 04:11
Penelope just wants pets and love from everybody, and belly scratches and head scratches. She just seeks attention. She has got the sweetest personality. She just loves everybody and loves kids in particular.

Jane 04:29
So, what do you have to do to get her trained up to be a therapy dog?

Evan 04:33
The most important part of therapy dog therapy dogs, excuse me, is the dogs just their general personality. They have to love people. They have to want to be getting pet. They have to want to seek out attention. Everything else is pretty easily taught. It's basic obedience: sit, stay, wait. They're always on a leash, so we don't have to teach them to come running to us from 50 yards away. But it's they need to want to be around people, and they can't be vicious, obviously.

Jane 05:04
Does Penelope have any special tricks?

Evan 05:07
She knows a couple tricks. Her most famous one is she likes to ignore me. I'll give her, I'll give her a command, and she will kind of look at me with these eyes and go, "No thanks, Dad."

Jane 05:19
Are there any kids here who have that special trick too. You know how to ignore your adults sometimes. Yeah, you're very connected to Penelope. So, do you have a sense of whether Penelope enjoys working? Because she's very calm. It's hard to know if she's having fun or not. But how do you know?

Evan 05:38
With how much I know Penelope and how long have we been together, and how much time we spent together, both at home and working? When she gets out of the car to go to a school, her entire demeanor changes. Her walk changes. Her tail goes up and starts wagging. She her butt starts wiggling back and forth, and she she starts prancing. She is just so happy. And then we go in the school, and she goes, which is her saying, "I love being here."

Jane 06:07
Okay, good. So you know she enjoys working. Yes. What does she get after a long day of work as a special treat?

Evan 06:13
She gets a lot of scratches, and she just snuggles up at home. She, the cat, will come up to her, and the two of them will kind of hang out.

Jane 06:22
Well, Evan and Penelope, thank you very much for sharing a little bit about what you do. Appreciate it.

Evan 06:26
Thank you so much for having us.

Jane 06:28
Thank you. So, thank you to Evan and Penelope. Penelope doesn't want to leave. Yep, she's doing her special trick. So, while we're waiting for Penelope to decide whether she wants to walk away or not. Let

me bring up another human who knows a lot about dogs and can answer all of your dog questions. This is JoAnna Platzer.

Joanna 06:49
Hi, everybody! Thank you for having me.

Jane 06:52
Thank you for being here.

Joanna 06:53
Yeah, I'm excited to talk dogs.

Jane 06:55
JoAnna is a lecturer at UVM, and she specializes in animal welfare, animal behavior, and companion animals. JoAnna, what is a companion animal?

Joanna 07:05
Well, companion animals are animals that we keep with us for companionship. So that means they're our friends, or maybe even our family members. So we like to have them around, and ideally they like to be around us too. So we have a bond with them, similar to the way we bond with other humans.

Jane 07:20
What what are some companion animals?

Joanna 07:22
So probably the most common companion animals are dogs and cats. But most pets that people have, they have them for their companionship, which makes them companion animals. So you have fish. If you have a bird, a parrot maybe. If you have a lizard, guinea pig, rabbit, a rat.

Jane 07:37
A snake, a spider.

Joanna 07:39
Yeah. If a spider gives you companionship. That's a companion animal. Yeah, definitely.

Jane 07:44
All right. So, do you have dog questions? Great. Melody and Sarah have the microphones. We'll go back and forth, and we'll see how many of your questions we can get answers to. Melody, we'll start with you.

Coco 07:54
My name is Coco. I'm five years old. My question is, why can dogs only see a certain color.

Annabelle 08:02

My name's Annabelle. I'm six years old, and I live in Colchester, Vermont. My question is, why do dogs see black and white only?

Joanna 08:14
Okay, so what can dogs see?

Joanna 08:15
So that's actually a common misconception. A lot of people think that dogs can only see in black and white, but actually they can see some colors. They can't see as many colors as we can, but they can see blues and yellows really well. They don't see red as well, but they see some color. And the trade-off for them is that they actually see better in low light than we do. So, you know, right after the sun is setting, when it's kind of dusky and it's hard for us to see, they see pretty well.

Eamon 08:40
My name's Eamon. I'm seven years old, and how? And my question is: How come most dogs have their ears down and kind of floppy, but cats have their ears mostly straight up?

Joanna 08:53
Ooh, good question.

Joanna 08:55
That's a really good question. So, if you know that dogs are evolved from wolves who have erect ears, so up ears, just like cats. That's sort of more common in the wild. And through the process of domestication, which is how dogs became dogs, we they evolved to live with humans. They started to look different. And one idea is that their ears got floppy as a result of us selecting them for being friendly to humans, and it was just a characteristic that was linked genetically to that. And so the ears might have started to get floppy because of that. Beyond that, humans also like the look of floppy ears. If you think about puppies are born with floppy ears, and we like our dogs to look more like puppies. So if you see, I missed it, but the Cavalier King Turtle Spano that was over here, he looks a lot like a baby dog, even though he's an adult, right? He looks like a puppy. He's got big eyes and he's got floppy ears, and we like that. And it's called petamorphosis. Basically, dogs have these longer ears because we like it, and so we've bred them to look like that. But also the longer ears, and some dogs like scent hounds, like basset hounds and blood hounds, it helps funnel the scent to their nose, so it helps them smell better. So there are reasons for it too, but also longer ears might be more likely to get scratched by thorns and things like that. So there's reasons that dogs have all sorts of different types of ears.

Mabel 10:11
Hi, my name is Mabel, and I am seven years old. And how are dogs born?

Jane 10:22
How are dogs born?

Joanna 10:24

So dogs are born from a mother dog. It's pretty similar to how humans are born from a mother human, but one of the big differences is dogs usually have litters. So usually, most of the time, when a human has a baby, it's just one baby, unless it's twins or triplets. But that's not that common. But in dogs, there's usually a litter, which means there's multiple babies born at once. So they grow in the mom together, and they're all born at once, and they all are raised together with the mom. So usually there can be one or two puppies, but a lot of times it's you know between let's say three and eight puppies in a litter. But they can even be bigger litters than that, and so they're born one after another, and then the mama dog cleans them off one by one and nurses them, and that's how they're born.

Child 11:06
Why do... do dogs cry?

Joanna 11:08
Oh, do dogs cry? Do you mean do dogs cry tears like we do?

Child 11:13
Yeah.

Joanna 11:14
So dogs don't cry in the same way we do. They do have water in their eyes, so their eyes can water, but it's not usually associate, we don't associate it with being sad. Like for us, we cry because we're sad. But you know how your eyes also might water when you get something in them, like dust. Their eyes do that too. So sometimes you'll see dogs that have some goo or some liquid coming out, but it's not probably because they're sad. It's probably because there might be something in their eye, or maybe they're not feeling well.

Jane 11:37
Here's a really great vocabulary word, which is anthropomorphize. Yeah. So sometimes humans like to think about animals or things that are not humans, and we think that they're like us. Like, do they have the same emotions as us, or do they do the same kind of behavior? So, do we know if dogs can get sad the same way humans do?

Joanna 11:58
So it's really hard to say because we can't really ask them, we can do we can look at brain scans of their brains and see like what regions light up, similar to how we do on humans. But we can't ask them with words. But it does seem like they have similar emotions, and it does seem that dogs they can sometimes get depressed. Like if they lose somebody that they have a close connection with, another dog or a human family member, sometimes they stop eating. They stop doing the things they like, which seems like they are maybe sad. And also, sometimes dogs will be distressed and they'll be very upset. Like some dogs have separation anxiety, and when you leave the home, they howl or they get nervous and they chew on themselves or they shred the house or they whine or they bark. These are all signs that we think that dog might not be very happy. So it's hard to say if they feel those same emotions the same way we do, but we do think that they have a lot of the same emotions we do, and I think sadness is definitely one of them.

Sayre 12:49
My name's Sayre. Wait. Oh, I'm nine years old. I live in Rhode Island, Newport. My question is: Why do dogs like peanut butter so much?

Jane 13:00
Oh, why do dogs like peanut butter?

Joanna 13:02
That's a really good question. I have some guesses. I can't ask them, so I'm not 100% sure why so many dogs really prefer peanut butter. I wonder if it's partly because it's a food that we think to give them, so they are like, oh, that's for me a lot of the time, and so they're used to it, and so we see them liking it a lot, and we often put it in their toys. Like if you have a dog with a puzzle feeder, like a Kong, an enrichment item, and they can eat it slowly. And I think it takes a while for them to eat it, so they're really like working at it. And I think that that's enjoyable for them. Like if you give them a snack, they can just scarf down in one bite. They don't really savor it, but if it's food that takes a while, they have to take that time to eat it, and they're probably enjoying it the whole time. It also smells pretty strongly, and they're really driven by their noses, so they seek it out, and it's it's high fat, and so that is you know good for their bodies to help them grow. So they probably seek out foods that have a lot of nutritional content like that. It's a good question. I I don't know exactly.

Adrian 13:54
My name is my name is Adrian. I'm 11 years old. I live in Fletcher, Vermont. And why do dogs have like such a stronger sense of smell than humans?

Joanna 14:05
Why do dogs have a better sense of smell than humans? So this it depends on. Not every species can be good at everything, and so we all have things that we're really we're really good at. And so we we can talk with each other. Dogs don't have that, but one area that they're really superstars is that they have this sense of smell, and so that really helped them survive and do well. And so that's if you think of dogs' ancestor, the wolves, that helped them hunt, find their pack mates, find mates, you know, warn them of danger. And so that helped them survive in the wild. And then when we domesticated dogs, or they domesticated themselves, they also kept that skill, and it was still useful in our dogs. We use it still for working dogs today, for for recreation, for sports, and it helps them navigate the world. It's their most important sense. So we are mostly visual, and we see the world as our primary sense. Theirs is their sense of smell. So it's really important to them. So it's gotten to be quite good.

Jane 14:58
How good?

Joanna 14:59
How good? That's a good question. So, if you picture a teaspoon of sugar and you dumped it in two Olympic-sized swimming pools, they could smell that. And in their brains, the proportionally the region of their brain that's processing scent is 40 times bigger than ours.

Jane 15:14
Wow!

Joanna 15:14
So they are hundreds, hundreds of times better at smelling than we are.

Jane 15:17
And some working dogs can even smell things like illnesses or bed bugs.

Joanna 15:22
Yeah, So dogs can smell cancer. Dogs can smell tuberculosis. They can smell tiny bed bugs. They can smell certain chemical compounds. All sorts of stuff. And we can train them to do that too.

Clem 15:33
My name's Clem and I'm seven years old, and I'm from Montpelier, Vermont. And why do dogs have black gums?

Joanna 15:42
Oh, that's a good question. Why do dogs have black gums? So not all dogs do. Some dogs have lighter gums, and it depends on their pigment. So it's tied to their coat color. So if you have a dog, and it's also breed specific. So some dogs that have black coats don't have black gums, but some dogs that have black coats do have black gums, and some dogs that don't have black coats also have black gums. So it's it's just a genetic trait. It's like you know if you have red hair versus black hair, they can have different coat colors and they can also have different pigments on their tongue and their lips and their gums. So it's just a genetic trait that's more common in certain breeds than others.

Eliza 16:16
My name's Eliza and I'm six and I'm from Utah. And why are dogs so cute?

Jane 16:22
That's something I ask every day about my own dog. Why is he so cute?

Joanna 16:27
You know, some people. Do you know what a parasite is? It's like a tick. It's like an it's a an animal that gets its life force from another animal without giving back. So like a parasite would yeah like a tick that sucks blood. And some scientists have said, "Well, dogs are parasites because we give them, we spend so much money on them, and we give them all this stuff, and they don't give us that much back." But other scientists said, "No, it's because they give us all this emotional comfort, and we really enjoy their company, and they make us happy." And how do you account for that? How do you track that? And so the thought is, why are humans keeping dogs if we put all this resources into them, and now we don't even really use them for work that much. And the thought is, is because they're really cute, and we think they look like baby animals, and they remind us of baby humans, and so we have this urge to

care for them. And so maybe dogs are cute, so that we will care for them. And the other answer is that we have selected them to be cuter, and we select for traits we think are cute. That's a great question.

Jane 17:21
I don't think my dog is a parasite.

Joanna 17:23
No, I don't think so either. I think that they're wrong on that.

Theo 17:26
My name's Theo. I live in Winooski, Vermont. And why do dogs have tails?

Virgil 17:31
My name is Virgil. I'm seven years old, and my question is why do dogs have tails?

Joanna 17:37
Perfect. Why do dogs have tails? Nice job. So dogs have tails, partly because they are evolved from wolves, and wolves had tails, and the tails were useful to them, so they kept them. Some things that dogs use their tails for are to help balance. If they're running really fast and they make a tight turn, it helps them stay balanced and stay upright. But they mainly use their tails for communication. So you can learn a lot about how a dog's feeling by watching their tails, and so the tails are useful for communicating with other dogs, with people, sometimes with other animals, and also dogs emit pheromones, which is a chemical that other animals of that same species can smell. And when they wag their tails, the pheromones get spread around. So it helps with a lot of different ways that dogs can communicate because dogs can't talk like we do, so that's how they talk to each other and talk to us.

Jane 18:24
Does a wagging tail always mean a dog is happy?

Joanna 18:27
A wagging tail does not always mean a dog is happy. So just because dog is wagging his tail, it doesn't mean the dog wants you to pet the dog or go up to the dog. Sometimes dogs will wag their tails when they're not very happy. So you want to learn the body language, and adults can help you learn this of the dog and look at the whole big picture. So look at how the dog's ears are, what the dog's face is doing, what they're doing with their whole body, and that cues you into the tail. But a lot of times, dogs do what's called a helicopter wag, where it wags in a circle, and that's usually reserved for just a really happy dog. And a low, soft wag is usually a better sign that a dog is happy than a stiff, stiff tight wag.

Callum 19:03
Um, my name is Callum, and I live in Colchester, Vermont. And my question is, why do some dogs have curly tails, but some dogs just have a straight tail?

Jane 19:17
Hmm. Yeah. More tail questions. Curly versus straight.

Joanna 19:19
Yeah. This is similar to other things we've talked about, and there's different reasons. Is some it's just humans think some people think a curly tail is cute, some people think a long straight tail is cute, and so they'll breed dogs for different traits, so they look like that. But it is interesting that some dogs can communicate; they communicate with their tails, like we said, right? And so some dogs have a natural bobtail where they don't really have much of a tail, or sometimes people do a surgery to take the dog's tail off, and then those dogs aren't as good at communicating. Maybe we think, and also sometimes dogs misunderstand other dogs that have a curly tail, as the dog means something with its body language that it doesn't mean just because that's how he naturally carries his tail.

Jane 19:59
They've actually studies that some dogs misunderstand what a curly-tailed dog is trying to say?

Joanna 20:04
There have been studies on that, and a lot of times there's actually like the results wouldn't be what you'd expect. So we think that dogs that have like flatter faces might be have a harder time communicating, or other dogs might read them as less friendly. But sometimes they find that that's not true. It depends on the study you look at and the feature you look at. Yeah.

Child 20:22
Why do dogs have two legs? They'll have four legs.

Jane 20:27
Yeah. Why do dogs have four legs?

Joanna 20:29
That's a great question. So we are bipedal, so we walk on two legs, and dogs are quadrupedal. So quad means four. So it's a really efficient way to run, and dogs are predators that run by hunting. So they hunt by running. Sorry, so they run really fast. So having four legs, they can cover more ground. It's also good for balance and stability. So it's just a really good way to get around. And we might be missing something by by walking the way we do.

Sunny 20:51
My name is Sunny. I'm nine years old, and I live in Winooski, Vermont. And my question is, why are dogs so good at hearing?

Joanna 21:00
Why are dogs so good at hearing? Well, dogs can hear pretty much everything we can, most dogs, but they can also hear higher pitch sounds than we do. So you know, sometimes you blow a dog whistle and you don't hear it, but the dog can hear it. So they can hear sounds that are higher pitched than we're able to hear, and it helps them learn information about the world. They can hear maybe there's another dog farther away that we can't hear, or maybe they're hearing the squeaking of a mouse under

the snow that we might not hear, so it helps them be able to find their way around the world and survive and do really well.

Alice 21:29
My name is Alice. I'm eight years old. I'm from Burlington, Vermont, and my question is: Why do some dogs have dew claws?

Jane 21:38
Oh, can you explain a dew claw as well?

Joanna 21:40
Yeah. So dogs have claws on the ends of their toes, like at the bottoms of their feet. But some dogs also have a claw that's sort of midway up their leg. Most of the time, it's in the front. But some dogs can have dew claws on their back feet too. And some dogs can actually have extra dew claws on that. And the idea is that maybe it helps with grabbing things. And so the dogs that tend to have dew claws in the back or extra dew claws, they think it might help them climb mountains and have extra traction. So those dogs are usually breeds that come from you know climbing in the Alps, and they think it can help them stay you know upright and not fall as much.

Jane 22:14
Do you know why it's called a dew claw? I don't.

Joanna 22:16
I don't know that. Yeah,

Arlo 22:19
I'm Arlo, and I'm six years old. I I live in California, um, Half Moon Bay, California. My question is, why do dogs um chase squirrels and cats?

Jane 22:35
Yeah, why do dogs chase squirrels and cats?

Joanna 22:37
Yeah. So we remember we talked about dogs are descended from wolves, and wolves would hunt their prey. So even though dogs, most of our dogs don't actually have to hunt their own food, a lot of those instincts are still around, and so dogs find it very rewarding. They find it very fun to chase things, and so some of those, some of our dogs still do want to eat the things that they catch, but some dogs just want to chase them. So hopefully they just want to chase cats and squirrels and not eat them.

Declan 23:06
My name is Declan. I'm 11 years old and I'm from Colchester, Vermont. And my question is, how do dogs get their like colors of fur and spots on them?

Joanna 23:18

Oh, so how do dogs get their colors of fur and spots in them. So this is genetic. So what a dog's coat looks like is largely genetic, and it depends on what the parents had and their ancestors. It can even be many generations back. We might not see that color, and then it pops up later on. And so it's just how they inherit their colors from their parents. It's similar to like you might have somebody else with red hair in your family, and certain traits are more common in you know certain family lines. But there are some influence, other influences on coat color. Like some dogs, if they're in the sun a lot more, they might have a lighter coat color because it might get sun bleach. Similar to your hair, sometimes some people's hair gets lighter in the sun in the summer.

Child 24:00
And why do dogs bark?

Jane 24:03
Why do they bark? Yeah, why do dogs bark?

Joanna 24:05
That's a good question. Dogs bark for so many different reasons. Similar to how you might speak for a lot of different reasons, the bark is kind of like their one of their ways that they talk and they communicate. So sometimes they'll bark to tell people, "Hey, there's something out the window." Sometimes they'll bark because they want something you have. Sometimes they'll bark because they want your attention, and maybe they want you to play with you. They want you to play with them. Sometimes they might bark because they're afraid and they want you or something else to give them some space and back up. There's a lot of different reasons, but mostly it's all just communication, just like how we talk to each other.

Evie 24:38
Hi, my name is Evie. I'm eight years old. What was the first dog as a pet?

Joanna 24:45
What was the first dog as a pet?

Jane 24:47
Ooh, that's a really cool question. I think it's so interesting how we study how wolves became dogs and at what point they were dogs, because at one point they were sort of in between the two. And actually, there's it's sort of hard. To know exactly because we don't have written records from when dogs were domesticated, they were domesticated at least 15,000 years ago, and just this year they found the bones of a dog that was buried on top of humans, and they were able to test the bones and find that they were definitely wolf bones and not dog bones. So at least 15,000 years ago, that was in Turkey, I believe.

Jane 25:20
What's the difference between a wolf and a domesticated dog?

Joanna 25:23

That's a good question. So the difference is domestication, like you said. So wolves are wild animals, and dogs have been selected through domestication, an evolutionary process, to have to have a special bond with people, to live with people. So all domesticated species are specially adapted to live in human managed environments, so to be cared for by humans. So dogs are very social with humans, so they're less fearful and less aggressive towards humans than wolves would be, and they form social bonds with us.

Henry 25:56
My name is Henry, and I'm six years old. My question is, why do dogs have ears?

Henry 26:01
Why do dogs have ears?

Joanna 26:03
That's a really good question. It's similar to the reasons that we have ears to hear stuff, to take in information about the world. So dogs can hear the same things that humans can hear, but they can also hear higher pitch things. So it might be like a dog whistle is sometimes too high pitched for us to hear, but dogs can hear it. So it helps them know, you know when their friends are around, when there might be a danger around, when there might be something that they should eat or go towards. So it helps them get information about the world. The other thing that dogs use their ears for a lot is communication. So just like we talked about with the tails, dogs don't use their words, but they use their bodies to share how they're feeling. And so the ears are actually very expressive. And if you learn to watch a dog's ears, you can learn a lot about how the dog's feeling and what they might do next.

Anna 26:44
My name is Anna. I'm four years old, and my questions is why are dogs different colors?

Jane 26:53
Why are dogs different colors?

Joanna 26:55
Oh, that's a really good question. Why are dogs different colors? The main reason is because humans like different colors, so we bred them to look different because we think it's interesting or cool or cute. There is some, you know, natural variation if you look at wolves, right? There's the Arctic wolves, which are white, and then you have this sort of it's called agouti. It's this like grayish color where they are very camouflaged. But when we domesticated dogs, we got what are called mutations, which a color a different color would just pop up, and humans were like, "That's really neat. I'm going to breed that dog again and try to keep that color around." So we, we humans really like when things look different and unique, and we all have different preferences. You might really like a red dog. I might really like a black dog, and so because different people like different things, we have dogs that are all different colors.

Roger 27:39
My name is Roger, and I six years old. How dogs lick people?

Jane 27:48
How do they lick people?

Roger 27:49
Yeah.

Jane 27:50
Yeah. How do dogs lick people?

Joanna 27:51
So it'd be the same way you would lick people. They stick their tongues out and they lick them. If you do, you want to know why they lick people? Yeah. Okay. So dogs usually lick people. There's a lot of different reasons they can lick people. A lot of dogs lick people because it's a sign of affection, so they're showing us love. So similar how you might hug someone in your family. Sometimes dog licks people lick people as a greeting or to say, "Hey, I love you." They can also be licking people because they can get information when they're that close to our faces. They can smell and taste things about us, you might have had some food on your face, and maybe that's why they're licking you too, or you were sweaty and you're salty, and that tastes good. And also, something that a lot of people don't realize is sometimes dogs lick to get more distance. So we call it kiss to dismiss. So sometimes dogs are licking us because they've learned that when they lick you, especially in your mouth, you go and you back up. And sometimes if you're too close in a dog space, they might not like that, and so some dogs might be licking you to get you to back up and give them a little space. So it's always important if a dog licks you to to see if they are trying to come closer to you or if they actually want a little space, and an adult can help you with that too.

Aldo 28:54
My name is Aldo. I'm nine years old, and my question is: How many breeds of dogs is there?

Joanna 29:01
How many breeds of dogs are there? So there's different organizations called kennel clubs, and they are the ones who say this is a dog breed and this is what it looks like. And there's different kennel clubs, so different kennel clubs actually have different numbers of breeds. But one of the really big ones, the FCI, which is international, there's hundreds of dog breeds in that one. And just because a breed isn't in a kennel club, it doesn't mean it's not a breed, and new breeds are being added to Kennel Club. So new breeds that people are creating are being added, and also older breeds that just weren't recognized. Maybe people didn't know about them outside of their, you know, local home region. They'll be added. So hundreds, and the and the number is growing. But we also do sometimes lose breeds if they that those dogs don't keep reproducing, so but the short answer is a lot.

Dean 29:47
My name is Dean, and I live in Vermont. And my question is, why are some dogs mixed with other dogs?

Jane 29:59

Yeah. Why are some dogs mixed breeds?

Joanna 30:02
That's a really good question. So the idea of a breed is is something that we humans invented. So dogs wouldn't have breeds without the way humans manage them and the decisions that we make. And so humans are the ones that decided we're going to breed dogs together that have certain traits that make them maybe really good at hunting, or maybe just we just think they look a certain way and we want them to look that way. But left to their own decisions, dogs would would breed with other dogs based on what they think is good. Like maybe that dog would be a good mother, or maybe that dog would be a good father, or have healthy offspring with that one. So dogs would interbreed with different breeds on their own, but also humans nowadays will sometimes cross different breeds, and that's how new breeds are created. Or maybe people think, okay, let's say this dog breed has these traits that we like, really like, but this dog has this dog breed has these healthy characteristics, and so if we cross them, we're hoping to get the best of both worlds, and we're hoping to get a healthy dog that has this great, let's say, hunting characteristic. And so that's why people would make those decisions. And sometimes also people do it just because it's cute or it's a fad. And so those are dogs that there is demand for. People want those dogs, and so that's why people will make that decision too, just to make dogs that people want.

Bella 31:21
My name is Bella, and my question is: How long does it usually take to train a dog?

Joanna 31:27
Okay, the question is: How long does it take to train a dog? So this is going to vary a lot based on the dog and what you're trying to train them to do. But dogs are super smart, and they can usually pick up on things in a very short amount of time. Like training a dog, I'd say you could train the average dog to sit in maybe a couple five-minute sessions. So it really depends on what you're training, but dogs are really good at learning from people, and humans are also getting really good at learning how to train dogs. And so when we put those things together, we can train them to do incredible things in pretty short amounts of time.

Jane 32:00
Coming up, more of your dog questions.

Jane 32:03
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. Today, we're learning all about dogs with animal behaviorist JoAnna Platzer in a recording we made at Vermont Public's recent Curious Kids Day live event. We also got to meet a dog and human team, Katie and Pippa from Therapy Dogs of Vermont.

Katie 32:22
Pippa is, has four legs. She's got white fuzzy hair. It's not fur; it's actually hair, and she's cut kind of short today. She's got a rosy nosy, is what I say, and she's a medium-sized dog. She weighs about 27 pounds.

Jane 32:38
You said she has a haircut.

Katie 32:39
She just got her hair cut recently.

Jane 32:41
Just for this show, she wanted to look her best.

Katie 32:43
Yeah, that's right. Okay, she prims. Yeah.

Jane 32:46
How old is Pippa?

Katie 32:47
Pippa is seven years old.

Jane 32:49
How did you know Pippa would be a good therapy dog?

Katie 32:51
Oh, I saw a therapy dog at the Burlington airport, and I thought my dog could do that. Pippa's really calm. She's really gentle, and I always say she barks once a season. She'll bark every spring, once a summer, once a winter, once a fall.

Jane 33:06
What gets her to bark?

Katie 33:07
Oh, that's a good question. It's so sometimes it's just the personality of a dog she's with. Yes,

Jane 33:13
A friendly bark sometimes, then?

Katie 33:14
Yeah, yeah. It's usually it's always friendly, but it's sometimes like, hey, this dog surprised me. Yeah.

Jane 33:20
What kind of training does a therapy dog get?

Katie 33:22

So the the training can be you can take classes. It's like a therapy dog obedience training, but there can also just be you go in and you try to take the test and pass it. So I've done a lot of training with Pippa outside of therapy dog training. So she didn't learn a ton of new skills. She was kind of already set up with that, but they have to learn to sit eventually. All dogs do sit.

Jane 33:46
She just did it.

Katie 33:47
She's a good listener!

Jane 33:47
Pippa just sat down very nicely.

Katie 33:51
But yeah, to not pull on a leash is really important. The command leave it because if you're in a hospital, there might be something dangerous on the floor, like a needle or a pill. So she has to know leave it really good. Yeah,

Jane 34:02
There was one of you kids here today brought a really cool stuffy, and one of the other dogs really loved that stuffy. And so that leave it is is a good thing for a dog to know because sometimes they have their own stuffies, and they're like, "Oh, this kid brought me a stuffy. I'll just take this one." Oh, nice. Yeah, yeah,

Katie 34:17
Yeah. Definitely, it's a safety skill as well as you know a nice obedient scale to have.

Jane 34:22
You just gave Pippa a treat. How come?

Katie 34:24
Pippa looked up at me, which I call a check-in. So she was like, "Am I doing what you want?" And my treat was to tell her, "Yes, that's exactly what I want," which is for her to sit nicely at my feet. And she just looked up again. So sometimes it's like, "Can I get another?" So I'll reward a spontaneous look, but I won't reward a double look. So she looks once, yes, and she looks again. I'm like, this is a game, and we're not playing it.

Jane 34:46
What kind of training does a human need to get to be a good therapy dog handler?

Katie 34:50
Yeah. So the the training for the humans is making sure that you know how to read your dog's cues. So looking at when they're stressed or when they're feeling overwhelmed. If they need to take a break, so

all those things are important. And then how to read the room and make sure that there's no hazards, or you know, if you're in a hospital, making sure that you're protecting your dog from the wheels of a wheelchair or of a cart that might be rolling by. So some of those things are called spatial pressure. So I'll make sure I'm between something dangerous and my dog, so that she doesn't get herself into trouble or hurt an adult.

Jane 35:22
We don't know exactly what dogs are thinking, of course, and we can't speak the same language as they do. But you, you mentioned you know a lot of Pippa's cues. You know what she's maybe conveying to you a little bit in in the way her ears are, or her tail is, or her body language. Do you have a sense if you think therapy dogs like Pippa enjoy working.

Katie 35:42
Oh yeah, definitely. Pippa enjoys working a lot. So you'll see that the leash is a certain color. We get her bandana out, and she knows it's time to work, and she gets excited. So she definitely enjoys the work for sure.

Jane 35:54
Does Pippa have any special tricks?

35:56
Pippa has the only special trick is not like wow that's so cool, but I think it's really cool because she does a tick check, which I showed earlier. So that's really important to me. I'm a nurse practitioner, so I don't like ticks and I don't like Lyme disease. Do you want me to try to see if she'll do it?

Jane 36:11
Yeah.

Katie 36:11
Okay.

Jane 36:12
So she's checking for ticks.

Katie 36:13
She is. You'll see. Okay. Okay. Pippa, you want to do your tick check? Oh. Okay, Pippa, tick check. Ready? Tick check, tick check. Oh, good girl.

Jane 36:26
We are checking Pippa for ticks.

Katie 36:27
That's right. So we do a lot of hiking in the woods where Pippa's off leash and she likes to run around. And so every day after that, she has to get a tick check. So we don't bring any ticks into our home. So

she's really good. When I say tick check, she lays on the ground and goes belly up, and then she hangs out.

Jane 36:43
Well, Katie and Pippa, thank you very much. We don't need to make Pippa work too, too much. We'll give her a chance to relax. But thank you for telling us a little bit about what she does and what you do.

Katie 36:51
Cool. Thanks for having us.

Jane 36:53
Should we give Pippa and Katie a round of applause?

Jane 36:58
And we have, because we can't speak dog. Another human with us to help us understand everything we can about dogs. This is JoAnna Platzer.

Silas 37:07
My name is Silas, and I'm eight years old. And my question is: Can dogs smell illness?

Joanna 37:13
Silas, that's a great question. And yes, they can. Dogs have been trained to detect a lot of different types of illness. They can smell tuberculosis. They can smell cancer. They train the dogs to smell COVID-19, and so dogs have to be trained to do this. Although there are dogs that spontaneously have like signaled to their people that they're that the people aren't well, and then the people find out from a doctor that the dog was right. But we can specially train dogs to detect the scent of someone who's sick and be able to tell that from someone who's healthy, and so then they can say, "Hey, this person has something you need to check out," and they're trained for a specific disease. So you're absolutely right. You can, and you weren't wrong. I'm sure dogs could smell ticks.

Jane 37:48
Yeah, yeah. How do you train a dog to smell something like an illness?

Joanna 37:52
So you have to have a sample. So you have to have a smell that is associated with that illness, and then you train the dog. This is what you alert to, similar to how they train dogs to detect bombs or find people, so they learn this is what my job is. This is what I detect, and then they have different samples that aren't like that aren't the ill, the smell of the illness. And so then the dogs learn to pick out just the smell of the illness. And sometimes we don't even know exactly what they're picking up on. We haven't like isolated the different chemicals, but the dogs have learned this is the scent profile of someone who has this type of illness.

Rona 38:26
I am five. I am four years old. My name is Rona, and my question is: How do dogs eat so fast?

Jane 38:38
Ooh, how do dogs eat so fast?

Joanna 38:40
How do dogs eat so fast? Well, I think sometimes they don't chew as well as they probably should. So they just gulp it down, and you know, dogs we control what they eat a lot of times. And some dogs don't live in homes with people. Some dogs are we call free ranging, so they live in different towns or cities, or they live in the wild, and so they have to eat when they have food available, so when there's food, it's smart for them to eat it all really fast, so that not another, so that an another animal doesn't take it, or they don't lose that food.

Jane 39:09
My dog like eats really fast, so we had to get a special feeder for him to slow him down, and it looks like a maze. And one time he ate chocolate, which is not good for dogs, and we took him to the vet, and they pumped out his stomach, and they said in addition to the chocolate, your dog had very big sticks and whole treats and chew toys that were not chewed at all. So yes, I can attest that dogs don't always chew.

Seamus 39:33
My um, my name is Seamus. I'm six years old. I live in Jericho, Vermont, and my question is: Why do dogs understand human words?

Jane 39:45
Human words. How do dogs understand human words?

Joanna 39:49
Good question. Oh, that's a really great question. So dogs don't come understanding our English words, but we we give the words meaning because they they learn that this predicts this. So. If we say cookie, and then we always bring a cookie right after that, the dog learns that cookie predicts the food is coming. So they learn through associations like that. So we pair two things together. You can also train a cue, like Pippa learned sit, and because she learned that when her owner says sit and she sits, sometimes then she gets a cookie. So they learn that these words have meaning, and sometimes the word means to do something, like come over to me, and usually that means I'm going to give you something fun or play with you or give you scratches. And they can also learn that you know if you say vet, they might say, oh no, that always comes right before I have to go to the vet, and I don't have a good time there. And so sometimes they can learn words like that just through associations.

Teddy 40:40
My name is Teddy, and I'm four years old, and I'm from Essex Junction. And my question is, why do dogs sometimes pee in the house?

Joanna 40:57

That is a very good question. So our dogs don't come learning not to pee in the house, and we have to teach them that. So that's what we call potty training or house breaking. And usually, when our dogs are adults, they learn the rules that they should pee outside. But sometimes, when dogs get very excited or very scared, they might forget that rule. And even sometimes, you know, when you're learning to to go to the bathroom in the toilet. If you have an accident, it's similar to them. Sometimes they just can't hold it because it's been too long since they've been outside. Sometimes they're not feeling well. Sometimes they're just really excited. Sometimes there's a new smell and it makes them want to mark and cover that smell with their own smell. Or sometimes they get really nervous and scared, and that's just they go to the bathroom inside.

Jane 41:39
And sometimes when our dogs get really old, it can be really hard for them too.

Joanna 41:43
Yeah, for health problems, definitely.

Mara 41:45
My name is Mara, and I'm from Burlington, Vermont. My question is, what do dogs like?

Joanna 41:55
Ooh, what do dogs like? Ooh, what do dogs like? That's very broad. Dogs like a lot of different things. Just like us, dogs have their own preferences for what they like. They like different foods. They like different toys. They like different types of play. Some dogs like to wear clothes and be warm. Other dogs don't. Some dogs like hugs. Most dogs don't like hugs. So there's a lot of variation. But most dogs respond to things that their ancestors in the wild, which were wolves way back thousands of years ago, would like. So a lot of dogs like to smell things in nature. They like to chase small fluffy animals that run by. Most dogs, if they've had good experiences with people, like to be close to people. Most dogs like food. Most dogs like to play. So it really depends on the dog. But if you watch a dog and you see what they try to go to, what they seek out, that can give you a clue about what that dog really likes.

Jane 42:46
A lot of dogs really like to sit in the sunlight too.

Joanna 42:48
Yeah, it's really nice.

Jane 42:50
You said most dogs don't like hugs.

Joanna 42:52
Yes.

Jane 42:53
Can you tell us more about that? Yeah.

Joanna 42:54
So actually, as humans, we really like to hug each other a lot of times.

Jane 42:58
Some of us do.

Joanna 42:59
Some of us do. But dogs, it's not as natural to them, and it can feel a little bit intense for them. And especially with dogs, if you're a stranger to them, that can be kind of scary. So it's better to not hug a dog unless you really know that that dog likes hugs. And it's just like you know, you might like a hug from someone in your family, but if a stranger tried to hug you, you probably wouldn't like that. So usually, it's better unless you really know that dog likes hugs to just pet them gently on the chest or on the shoulder and see if they come back and ask for more pets and maybe not on the top of their heads. Yeah, it's not good to pet dogs on the top of their heads most of the time when you meet them because if you think about a big person that was looming over you and they went pat pat pat on your head, that'd be kind of scary, right? So it's kind of similar to dogs, if you think about their size, you actually might be similar in size to some dogs. But usually, people are bigger, and it can be kind of scary when you reach over them because they're not sure what you're doing.

Caden 43:50
My name is Caden, and I'm six years old. Why are dogs fluffy?

Joanna 43:55
Why are dogs fluffy? Dogs look very different. They're actually the species on Earth that have the most variety in what they look like, and so some dogs are fluffy, and some dogs have very short fur, and some dogs have actually no fur. If you ever seen the movie Coco, Xolo dogs don't have fur, but fluffy dogs are usually fluffy because we we bred them for that trait because we think it's cute, but also it can be helpful if they live in a cold climate. So it's really cold. It can keep them warm. It can protect them from, you know, brambles or other cuts from they would might get in the if they're in nature. So it does help them out sometimes too. It protects them and it keeps them warm. And also we like the look of it. So sometimes we breed for it and have dogs just because we think it looks cute.

Malcolm 44:40
My name is Malcolm. I'm six years old, and my question is: Why do dogs eat their poop?

Jane 44:49
Good question. Why do dogs eat their poop?

Joanna 44:51
Oh, that's a great question. So this is called copperphagy, is what we call it.

Jane 44:55
Can you say that again?

Joanna 44:56
Copperphagy.

Jane 44:57
Copperphagy.

Joanna 44:58
Yes, and so. Sometimes dogs eat their poop because they're lacking a nutrient that they might be trying to get from their poop. Sometimes dogs are just really they need more food. My dog was very very very skinny when I got him, and he used to eat poop, and now he has enough food. He has enough food, so he's a good healthy weight, and he doesn't do it anymore. And some dogs have just developed the habit, and they do it, and it's gross, but it's not necessarily that bad for them. So sometimes dogs just seem to do it because they enjoy it. We had a good ask of that.

Jane 45:30
We had a dog for a while who liked to eat his poop in the winter time, and we used to call them poopsicles.

Joanna 45:38
You have personal experience, yeah.

Finn 45:40
My name is Finn. I'm seven years old, and my question is: Why do people even have dogs as pets?

Jane 45:48
Yeah, why do we even have dogs as pets?

Joanna 45:50
That's such a good question. I think the primary reason people keep dogs now is for companionship because they can really make us feel good and be a friend or even a family member to us. So the most common reason people keep dogs now is because we like the you know the emotional connection we have with them, the bond with them. But also a lot of times people keep dogs because they help them. So they do some sort of work for them or some sort of service. So dogs can do a whole lot of different types of jobs. Dogs can help people herd sheep. Dogs can help find missing people. Dogs can tell us when if you have an illness, like when you might have a seizure. So dogs have traditionally done a lot of work. Dogs can guard property. Dogs can tell us when there's a threat. So a lot of dogs, evolutionarily throughout time, have warned us when you know if you're hunter gatherer and there's a bear approaching your your camp, the dog can tell you and you have a warning, so dogs can do work, but the main reason now is because we love them and we enjoy their company.

Olinia 46:48
My name is Olinia, and I'm six and three quarters. Why can dogs not eat chocolate?

Joanna 46:56
Oh, that's a good question. So dogs can't eat chocolate because chocolate contains theobromine, which is a chemical that dogs can break down, but at a much slower rate than humans can. So we can break down much faster, so it doesn't build up in our bodies and cause problems. But it can be toxic to dogs because they don't break that chemical down very quickly, and so it can cause all sorts of health problems and cause their bodies to shut down. So they can't have any chocolate.

Bono 47:22
My name is Bono, and I am eight years old, and I live in Burlington, Vermont. Why are some dogs angry and some dogs are not angry? Yeah.

Jane 47:34
Why are some dogs angry and maybe more aggressive than others?

Joanna 47:37
So, dogs will have different emotions at different points throughout their life. Just like you know, in one day you might have a lot of different feelings, and it depends on what's going on in your day, what kind of day you're having. So within a dog, there is you know they sometimes are might be angry, sometimes might be happy, sometimes might be nervous, scared. They can have lots of different emotions, but across different dogs, which it seems like more your question was asking, is sometimes we have dogs that just have a temperament. Their personality is just more nervous, or they might just be more aggressive. Sometimes we select dogs for that, so we breed for that. If you think about guard dogs, sometimes that aggression is helpful. If it's aggression towards other animals, that'd be hunting, and we use that too to get food for us. So sometimes we want that aggression, but usually aggression towards people is not helpful these days. And so usually we try to breed dogs that aren't aggressive to people. And if they are, sometimes those dogs need training. Sometimes those dogs aren't a good fit for you know living in a family with people. And so they basically the short answer is they have different personalities, just like people have different personalities, and some might be more aggressive than others.

Riley 48:43
My name is Riley. I'm eight years old, and my question is: Can dogs understand human feelings?

Joanna 48:52
Oh, that's a really good question. Can dogs understand human feelings? Well, this is really hard to sort of do research on and know exactly what dogs know and what they can understand, but we do see that dogs do tend to respond to us when we are happy and excited. They tend to be happy and excited when you sometimes see when we're nervous or we're scared or we're stressed. Sometimes the dogs act differently towards us. If you have a dog at home, maybe they they come and curl up next to you to maybe try to make you feel better. So they definitely seem to respond to our emotions, and it might be what our facial expressions are. It might be what we smell like. Dogs can smell the shirt of someone who was nervous, and they react differently to that than a shirt of somebody who was happy. So they can pick up on our emotions through all sorts of different ways, and they do seem to respond to that.

Matthew 49:33
I'm Matthew, and I'm six years old, and my question is what? What's the difference between hair and fur?

Jane 49:46
Yeah, what's the difference between hair and fur? Because Pippa's human. Katie told us that Pippa has hair, not fur.

Joanna 49:52
Yeah. So most dogs have fur, which means that it grows to a certain length and then stops. If you think of. A golden retriever has a little bit longer fur than a Labrador retriever, and that fur tends to shed out. So it grows to a certain length, and then it sheds out, and then they replace that. Whereas hair tends to keep growing, much like your hair. So it doesn't necessarily grow indefinitely, just like your hair would probably stop growing at a certain length. And you know, some people have longer hair than others; they can grow longer naturally. But hair tends to keep growing, and you usually have to give those dogs haircuts. You need to groom them more often, and clip the hair down or shave the hair down to cut it shorter. Whereas dogs with fur usually just brush them.

Olivia 50:31
I'm Olivia. I'm nine, and my question is: How long do dogs live?

Jane 50:35
How long do dogs live?

Joanna 50:37
This so this is a good question, and it varies a lot by dog. So just like humans have all different lifespans, you never know 100 percent. But most dogs live between 10 and 15 years. But a lot of times, the bigger breeds don't have as long of a lifespan as the smaller breeds. Some really old dogs have lived into their 20s.

Jane 50:57
Wow.

Iggy 50:58
My name is Iggy. I'm six. Um, I'm I'm seven years old, and I live in Burlington, Vermont. Um, and my question is that I used to have a dog named Katie Dog, but she died. Um, is there like a day to honor dogs that died?

Joanna 51:19
Every day. I don't know that there's a specific day. There might be, but I think it's a nice idea to think of her every day and remember how much you loved her.

Jane 51:28

We have some special celebrations for my dog who died, and every year on his birthday, we share stories about what we remember about Oliver and all of the ways that we loved him and the ways he's still with us. So you could pick a day with your family to celebrate Katie Dog. We're going to leave it there for today because I know you all have a lot to do on your Saturday. So I want to thank you for being such a great audience, and can we thank JoAnna Platzer and Katie and Pippa for being great? Thanks to JoAnna Platzer and Therapy Dogs of Vermont for being part of Vermont Public's Curious Kids Day. If you want to be in the know when we have events like that, sometimes in person, sometimes virtual, or when we're looking for things like questions from you for future episodes, or occasionally answers from you, join our mailing list. You can find a link right on our web page, butwhykids.org. As always, if you have a question about anything, send it to us. We get lots of questions, and we do wish we could answer them all. But even if we don't get a chance to answer your question, we love hearing what's on your mind and what you're feeling curious about. You can have an adult help you record your question using one of the free apps on a smartphone or tablet, and then you can send the file to questions@butwykids.org. If you like our show, please leave us a review or some stars on whatever platform you use to listen, or share our podcast with other kids and families you know who you think would like it. It really helps when other kids and families and teachers discover us. Our show is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette, and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public, and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo. Special thanks in this episode to Frank Alwine, Phil Edfors, and Peter Engisch for their help with our live taping, and to Amy Zielinski for organizing Kids Day. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds, and we'll be back in two weeks with an all-new episode. Until then, stay curious.