Lesson 1: Communication and Empathy

Overview: Students will analyze how dogs communicate. Students will develop the social skill of empathy by learning how to identify nonverbal cues of dogs and how to appreciate an animal’s perspective. They will engage in critical discussion, role-play and observation activities.

Procedure:

Warm-Up: Guess What I’m Saying!

1. Play a nonverbal game of “telephone.” Think of a message that a dog or cat might want to send, such as “I’m nervous” or “I’m hot and would like a drink of water.” Communicate the message to the first student, using only gestures.

2. Have students pass the message along to each other, using only gestures. Continue until the message reaches the last student. Ask the last student to say aloud what he or she thinks the message is.

3. Discuss how it felt to communicate nonverbally.
   - Ask the students how they feel when someone doesn’t understand what they are saying.
   - Ask the students how they think dogs or cats feel when we don’t understand them.

Understanding Dogs

1. Have students turn to the “What Are You Saying” worksheet. Discuss the body language in each illustration and why it’s okay or not okay to approach a dog who looks like this.

2. Have pairs of students look at each photograph on the “What Are You Saying” worksheet and identify how the dog feels and what signals the dog is giving to show those feelings. Then discuss as a whole group.

3. Discuss why it’s important for people to understand what a dog is saying through body language. Go through each photograph with the following questions:
   - “If you saw a dog who looked like [identify photo], what would you do? Why?”
   - “What could be making the dog feel this way? Why is it important we know that?”

4. Explain that dogs depend on us to fulfill their needs. Guide students to understand that reading dogs’ body language and thinking about how they are feeling is one way to meet those needs and show we care about them.
Lesson 1: Communication and Empathy (continued)

Approaching a Dog

1. Ask the students what is the first thing they should do if they want to pet an unfamiliar dog.
   • Answer: Ask your parent or guardian and then ask the dog’s guardian if it is okay to pet his or her dog.

2. Ask the students what is the second thing they should do.
   • Answer: Hold your hand up to the dog’s nose so he or she may sniff your hand. Your fingers should be tucked in so that if the dog did get startled he or she could not bite your fingers.

3. Ask the students what is the final step.
   • Pet the dog behind the ears or under the chin.
   **Note:** Do not pet on top of a dog’s head because some dogs may become nervous when approached from above.

4. Bring out the stuffed dog toy and demonstrate the proper steps involved with petting an unfamiliar dog.

5. While you pretend to be the stuffed toy dog’s guardian, have each student individually come up and practice the 3 steps to properly pet an unfamiliar dog.

Wrap Up:

Ask students to notice dog and cat behaviors and to report back next time you see them. Also, remind the students that they are not to approach a dog or cat they do not know without permission from the animal’s guardian.
What Are You Saying?

You can tell what a dog is trying to say by his or her body language. Look at the dog’s tail, fur, ears, mouth, eyes, and posture.

- Safe to approach
- Not safe to approach

Just chilling.

Nice to meet you!

Back off!

Let’s play!

I’m nervous.