

Are Dogs Polite?

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A woman we talked to recently said that her dog was very polite. He wouldn't eat unless his owner had started to eat first. Do dogs have manners? Can they be courteous, refined and cultured? It is certainly possible to teach dogs to behave in ways that we think are polite, such as letting people go ahead of them up or down stairs, sitting and waiting at street corners rather than dashing across or even getting off the furniture when we come in the room. However, unless we teach them otherwise, dogs will jump up on people, dash through doors knocking people down, lick their private parts in public and drag their butts across your carpet.

The values of politeness and courtesy differ in different cultures. What is polite for Americans may not be polite for Amazonian natives and vice versa. There is no reason to believe that dogs know anything about American cultural values. We can teach a dog not to eat before we do, but does the dog do it because she is being polite? Dogs probably don't have a sense of polite or impolite, right or wrong. They only know what works for them. If they try to eat before their owners, they may get physically punished, reprimanded or get their food taken away. If they wait until they are told they can eat, nothing bad happens and they get to eat. They learn to wait because it works, not because they believe it is polite.

Some dogs won't eat before their people do even when they haven't been taught to wait. Why do they do it if not to be polite? One reason has to do with the social nature of dogs. Some dogs just aren't as interested in eating if they are by themselves. They may be anxious or depressed when separated from people or other animals. When in the presence of people, they begin to eat.

A phenomenon known as social facilitation can influence eating as well. It is known that for many social animals, like dogs, the behaviors of others can influence what a dog does. So if dogs down the street begin to bark at the postal delivery person, your dog may join in as well. Eating is also socially facilitated in dogs. When you begin to eat, your dog may be much more interested in eating his food as well. It looks like he is being polite but it is really that your eating has stimulated his eating.