

Beneath



The Power of Silence

A note from us...

We spend a lot of time encouraging people to notice their dogs, but it's perhaps just as useful to notice ourselves around them.

This edition began with a question about how much we speak to our dogs and what might happen if, every now and then, we said a little less. Not because talking to them is wrong, but because silence may give both ends of the lead room to notice something different.

Ruth and Louise



The Power of Silence

What becomes possible when we stop filling every moment with words?

We can talk to our dogs a lot without really noticing how much we're doing it. There are the things we genuinely need to say, but around those can be a running commentary of encouragement, reassurance, questions and instructions. Some of it is simply because we enjoy talking to them. They're part of our lives and it would feel strange not to include them in the conversation, even if their contribution is mostly a look that suggests they have no idea what we're going on about.

“We may tell ourselves we're helping, but I'm not sure the dog always needed rescuing. It may have been us who needed something to happen.”

It becomes more interesting when the dog is learning or trying to work something out. A pause can feel surprisingly long when we're waiting for them to do something, and silence leaves us alone with the uncertainty of whether they understand. Before long, we're repeating the cue, pointing, encouraging or offering another clue. We may tell ourselves we're helping, but I'm not sure the dog always needed rescuing. It may have been us who needed something to happen.

There is nothing wrong with helping a dog who needs it. The difficulty is knowing whether they need our help when we haven't given them enough time to show us. If we regularly step into that gap, the dog may learn that waiting for our next piece of information is easier than continuing to explore the problem. We then see them looking towards us and assume they don't know what to do, so we help again. Somewhere along the way, we can become part of the reason they stop trying quite so soon.

Silence gives the dog a chance to stay with the question for a little longer. They might pause, move away, return and try something else. They may get it wrong, although often what we call wrong is simply part of them working out what doesn't lead anywhere. If we speak every time they hesitate, we interrupt that process and replace their decision with ours.

I think this is particularly noticeable in scentwork because the dog has more information than we do. We can set up the search and make decisions about safety, but we cannot detect what they can smell. Chattering our way through it doesn't give them better access to the scent. If anything, it can pull part of their attention back towards us just as they're trying to follow something we can't detect.

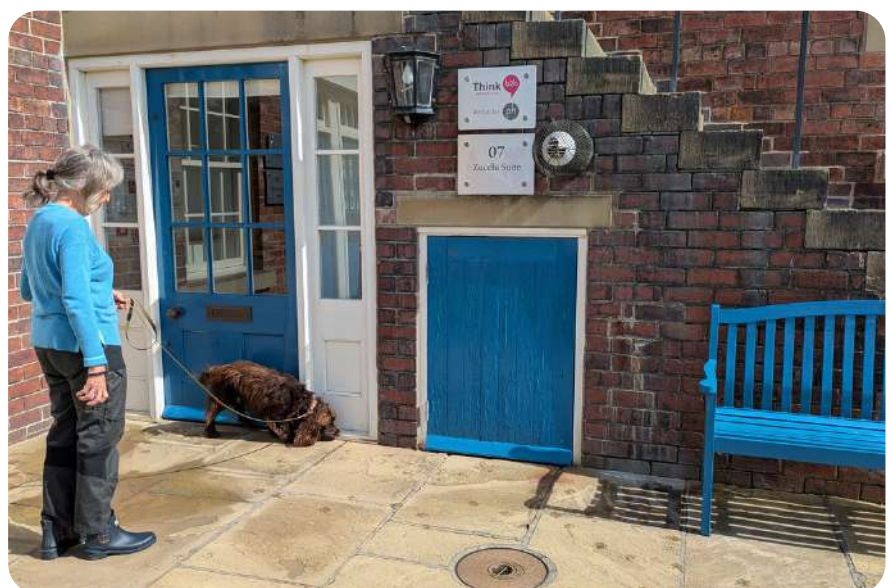
But it isn't only in scentwork. It can happen when a dog pauses on a walk to take something in, or is working out whether to approach, move away or find another way through. We might start encouraging, reassuring or telling them what to do before they've had the chance to decide for themselves. Sometimes they don't need an answer from us. They need enough quiet to find their own.

Going quiet can feel as though we've stopped supporting them, but it may communicate something quite different. It can show that we trust them to continue and believe they're capable of working something out. That doesn't mean confidence suddenly appears because we've stopped talking, but it can grow through experiences of trying, deciding and finding their own way through something. When we always arrive with the answer, they don't get as many opportunities to discover that.

“Sometimes they don't need an answer from us. They need enough quiet to find their own.”

Silence changes something for the person too. When we aren't concentrating on what to say next, our attention can move towards what the dog is doing. We may notice the small pause before they change direction, the moment they return to an area or how their body changes when something begins to make sense. Or it might be the speed and sound of their breathing that changes, reflecting their physical and emotional state. Those details are easily missed when our own voice is filling the space.

We may also notice ourselves. The urge to encourage can appear when we're worried the dog will fail. Reassurance may help us feel kinder when watching them struggle, while giving another command creates the comfort of doing something. Remaining quiet asks us to tolerate a bit of uncertainty and allow the dog's process to unfold.



There are moments when the most useful thing I can do is zip it. Not because silence is a training technique or because speaking to dogs is somehow wrong, but because nothing I'm about to say will make the situation clearer. If anything, I become a distraction, snapping them out of what they were doing. The dog has enough information and needs room to use it.

At other times, they do need us. A clear cue can keep them safe, help them understand what is available or give them the information they're missing. Our voices can also be part of the relationship we enjoy with them. This isn't an argument for becoming silent around our dogs. It is about noticing whether the words have a purpose.

When everything is accompanied by talking, the words that matter have to compete with everything else we say. They can become part of the background, particularly when we repeat cues that the dog cannot respond to or offer encouragement while they're already doing the thing we asked. Speaking less may make it easier for both of us to recognise when something important has been said.

“It’s about noticing whether the words have a purpose.”

I'm never going to stop talking to my dogs or others. What I am becoming more aware of is the difference between talking with them and talking over what they're trying to do.

Silence isn't empty. It can hold time, attention and trust. In those moments of being silent, observing and being present with your dog, you can just enjoy watching them and learn from them, because more than anything, it gives us the chance to find out what the dog might do if we don't provide the answer first. And how that affects what they do next.

Ruth.



Something to notice...

The urge to speak often appears during the pause between your dog meeting a problem and deciding what to do. That pause may feel much longer to you than it does to them.

Before filling it, notice what you were about to say and what you hoped the words would change. Your dog may need the information, but they may also have been about to show you something.

One question to leave with...

Who needs the words in that moment, you or your dog?

Upcoming events:

22nd November 2026 10:00 - 16:30

Hosted by Sniffly Dogs

Delivered by South Yorkshire Dog First Aid

£64.50 per person, 10 places available

Email us at hello@snifflydogs.com to book your place.



Beneath is a monthly newsletter from Sniffly Dogs. It gives us a place to explore what lies beneath everyday life with dogs, including what is happening for the person alongside them.

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