

What Your Dog's Licks Really Mean

Do you know what your dog is thinking when he runs up and plants you with a wet greeting? Is it love and fondness or something else? You'll be surprised to find out all the different reasons why your dog may enjoy licking you.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- One reason dogs are so quick to lick is because it's one of their earliest memories of their mother — the nurturing they received when they were at their most vulnerable, which is now inherent in their behavior
- “Underdog” members of a dog pack lick the more dominant members in an important gesture that helps maintain the harmonious equilibrium of which dogs are in charge of the pack
- The penchant dogs have for the taste they savor when they give you a lick is the same reason they snatch your socks and underwear — they smell like you, and it comforts them

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Truth be told, depending on the circumstances, not all of those fantastically wet smooches your dog surprises you with are altogether welcome, but you have to admit there's a certain fusion of sweetness, affection and hilarity in all that **puppy love**. But when Fido runs up and greets you with a slurp right on your lips, can you interpret it as a kiss? It's nice to think he's so fond of you, but is that what he's really feeling when he delivers it?

According to BarkPost, one reason dogs are so quick to lick is because it's one of their earliest memories of their mother.¹ The minute he was born, his mom gave him a literal spit bath, which, in the dog kingdom, is one of the first behaviors dogs learn. In a dog's mind, it's equal to the nurturing he received when he was at his most vulnerable, as he was licked to stimulate breathing and to get clean.

That positive memory is one your dog is just passing on. In his canine mind, it's just what you do! What do you do with such inherent behaviors? Why, share the love, of course! Licking his most favorite person in the world — and for some, his favorite person might be anyone in the area, be it human, canine or feline — is the most natural thing in the world.

Could Your Dog's 'Affectionate' Licks Mean Anything Else?

As it happens, dogs may start the whole licking thing as a sign they're submitting to you. BarkPost adds:

“Lower-ranking pack pups lick higher-ranking pups, and you're the top dog! It might even be a way of your dog asking for food. In the wild, puppies lick their mother's mouths as a way of asking them for food and showing submission. Somewhere in your dog's genes, they've kept the same instinct.”²

Animal Planet notes that the “underdog” members of a dog pack lick the more dominant members in an important gesture that helps maintain the harmonious equilibrium of which dogs are in charge of the pack.³

When a dog licks you (or anybody else), the “feel-good hormones” called endorphins rush in — for them, although you might get a similar outpouring of comfort and satisfaction, too. Their endorphin rush arrives because they love being themselves around you. They know you know they accept you, love you and defer to you, and their licking shows it.

When your dog rushes in with his tongue hanging out, it also may be because he liked your taste last time and wants a little more. Even if you’re sweaty and your skin must be something close to a salt lick, maybe that’s what your dog likes, or even needs nutritionally. But that penchant for the taste they savor when they give you a lick is the same reason they snatch your socks and underwear. They smell like you, and it comforts them.

You also have to consider that this super demonstrative way dogs use to tell you how they feel is one of the only tools they have in their box. They can’t actually say “I love you” or even “I’m so happy to see you!” The universal language of the dog lick says all that for them without even needing to say a word.

But then again, licks from your dog might mean just what you think they do — **signs of affection**, says Dana Ebbecke, who works for the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) Adoption Center in New York City.⁴ She had a few more bits of wisdom regarding those pups who love getting a few good licks in.

Dogs Sometimes Show More Than Affection With Their Licks

“Long, slurpy kisses that are accompanied by a soft, wiggly body are usually very affectionate gestures,” she says, but adds that little bumping kisses around your mouth might be killing two birds with one stone, in a manner of speaking; they might be smelling you and other parts of the landscape, which gives them a lot more information, the Dodo says. In fact:

“Sometimes small licks near the mouth are ways for the dogs to get more information into their nose ... Some dogs are even unintentionally taught to give kisses as a way to get space from their people. This usually happens when a person puts their face too close to the dog's face before they are comfortable ... After the 'kisses,' the person moves away and the dog learns that you can get a person's face further away by licking it.”⁵

Dogs have been known to put their paw up in the universal “halt” signal so the offending human (or cat or other dog) won’t come any closer. Animal Planet suggest that dogs lick people to relieve stress, kind of the way people do who bite their own nails.

Trouble Shooting Dogs Who Lick People Too Much

But what if you’d really like your dog to stop licking you (and others) quite so much? U.K. author, dog trainer and TV personality Victoria Stilwell offers savvy advice in an Animal Planet trouble-shooting question-and-answer segment:

“If your dog's licking is purely a sign of affection, one way to decrease this is to ignore the licking. Licking never gets attention. If your dog licks you, then you immediately stand up and walk into another room. You want to teach your dog that licking means the person will leave the room. When you pet your dog, if he starts to lick, the petting stops and you walk away. With repetition the licking will stop.”⁶

Many of the most ardent dog lovers put themselves right in the path of the sloppiest, wettest kisses, hunkering down on their pup's level to let him do that whole licking thing to his heart's content. These are the people who give treats to their dog just for being so affectionate, so everybody's happy.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [BarkPost 2017](#)

^{3,6} [Animal Planet May 15, 2012](#)

^{4,5} [The Dodo December 13, 2016](#)
