

Communicating Without Words

The Pack Dynamics of Wolves and Humans

Teacher Notes

Grade: 4 and up (Note that some students may be inhibited about acting out wolf behaviors; use your understanding of your class's "personality" in deciding whether to do this lesson.)

Subject: Language Arts

Group Size: Whole class, small groups

Duration: 50-minute period or longer

Skills: Oral communication, comparing, contrasting, group participation, improvisation.

Vocabulary: alpha, omega, territory, pack, dominance hierarchy, active submission, passive submission, agonistic tooth snapping, play bow, exaggerated looking away, bite-intention signal, consummatory face, play face

OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify various wolf body postures and facial expressions and interpret their meanings
- Compare wolf postures and expressions to human "body language"
- Prepare and perform charades exercises to illustrate nonverbal forms of wolf communication

READING ASSIGNMENT:

- 4. Pack Life and Communication

MATERIALS:

- *Through Wolf Eyes* video (in trunk)
Several scenes demonstrate wolf "body language."
- Audio tape of wolves howling (in trunk)

- Index cards

Optional: Readings from books in trunk: "Discovering Wolves," pages 17-19; Zoobooks," pages 6-7; "The Return of the Wolf," Chapter 5

BACKGROUND:

Wolves are social animals living in family units or packs. Each pack has a tightly structured dominance hierarchy and each pack member has an assigned role which is constantly reinforced through communication. The alphas, almost always the breeding pair, have ultimate authority in the family, just as parents in human families do. Wolves use body language, vocalizations and facial expressions to convey clear and readily understood messages. This assures peace and harmony within the pack.

Humans are also social animals. Our packs

are called families.

PROCEDURES:

Show the video *Through Wolf Eyes* and have the students take notes on wolf behaviors as they watch.

A. The Social Customs of Wolves and Humans

Lead a class discussion on the comparisons between the social behavior of wolves and humans. Raise the following questions:

1. Who in your family is responsible for providing food for the others?
2. How do we cache food?
3. How do we greet people we are being introduced to for the first time?
4. How do we greet old friends or family members?
5. How do we greet each other if we are NOT friends?
6. How do we mark our territories? (Think about how we identify our property lines, our houses, our personal belongings, our school lockers. How are we “officially” identified - social security numbers, pin numbers, phone numbers. etc.)
7. Wolf packs may include just the immediate family (mother, father and pups) or it may be an extended family, including yearlings from previous litters who have not dispersed. How are humans grouped socially (singles, couples, immediate families, extended families, colleagues, fellow members of organizations) and how do these groups interact?

B. Nonverbal Communication in

Humans

Divide the class into small groups. Have each group brainstorm for five minutes to come up with a list of the gestures and facial expressions (nonverbal cues) we use and the messages they convey. Give a few examples from the list below to get them started. Then compile a class list, adding any examples the class misses.

1. Thumb up
2. Thumb down
3. Open palm up
4. Both palms held out, forearms stiff
5. Index finger stiff, shaking it up and down
6. Fingers curled into tight fists
7. Narrowed eyes looking directly at another person
8. Wide eyes looking directly at another person
9. Averting eyes
10. Staring intently into another person's eyes
11. Crossed arms
12. Hands on hips
13. Slashing gesture with hand
14. Hands covering face
15. Holding hand out, palm down, wiggling hand back and forth
16. Hand cupping chin
17. Index finger against cheek
18. Lips turned down
19. Lips curved up
20. Lips curved up, teeth exposed
21. Teeth exposed, one corner of upper lip turned up

C. Nonverbal Communication in Wolves

Ask the students how wolves convey the

following messages to one another:

1. I am suspicious of you
2. I am friendly, I accept you
3. I am afraid of you
4. I am not afraid, but I accept your authority
5. Let's play
6. I am angry
7. I am interested
8. Get off my turf

Have them add more to the list if they can.

D. Human Vocalizations

Ask students to list the vocalizations (sounds, not words) we humans make when we are:

1. Excited
2. Surprised
3. Terrified
4. Startled
5. Physically hurt or in great pain
6. Emotionally hurt or very sad
7. Content
8. Happy, responding to something funny
9. Angry

Have them add more to the list if they can.

E. Wolf Vocalizations

Play the audio tape of wolves howling. Remind the class that wolves howl for many reasons: to reunite with other pack members, to signify the start of a hunt, to tell other wolves to stay off their territory. Tell them to listen for the variations in pitch, extensions of notes and harmonies that have astounded many recorders of "wolf music." Encourage inspired students to write songs or poems that can be performed with a background of wolves howling.

F. Dominance Hierarchies

Dominance hierarchies work for wolves, and in many situations for humans, too. Many of our institutions have strict hierarchies, the military, for example. Have students interview a member of the military or ask someone in the service to come to school and speak to students about the chain of command and why it is important. Ask students to list some dominant/ subordinate relationships (be sure they do not confuse "dominant" with "excessively authoritarian"). Some examples are parent/child; older sibling/younger sibling; babysitter/client; coach/team player; teacher/student; ship's captain/crew

G. Wolf Talk Charades.

Write descriptions of wolf behaviors on index cards (see samples below) and place in a box. Have students draw cards from the box. Give them time to prepare, practice and then perform their behaviors for the class to guess.

1. **Play bow.** Time for some exercise. It's a good day for playing tag and chase-the-tail! You rise from your nap, stretch and invite the others to play! Extend your front legs, raise your hindquarters, cock your ears forward, and wag your tail!

2. **Play grin.** In play bow position, retract your lips in a big open-mouthed smile. Pant and jump around. Place your front paws on another pack member's back. Roll around on the ground.

3. **Agonistic tooth snapping.** You are an alpha wolf, fiercely protective of your territory. A stranger ignores your scent

markings and approaches. You “stand tall,” raise your hackles and stiffen your tail and extend it straight out. Your ears are forward as you fix the intruder with a ferocious stare and display your weapons – your teeth. Retract your lips in a snarl, yelp and growl!

4. Bite-intention signal. It's time for a nap. You snap at the air as a sign that it's time for a break in this game of grab-the-tail or tug-of-war! (This gesture is similar to agonistic tooth snapping but less intense because it is directed at family members rather than strangers.)

5. Active submission. You are a lower-ranking wolf and are glad to see the alphas have returned to the rendezvous site after a jaunt. You greet them by lowering your body profile, flattening your ears, grinning submissively (lips retracted in a smile, no teeth bared) and tucking your tail or lowering it and wagging it rapidly in a low position.

6. Passive submission. You are a lower-ranking wolf who has decided to sneak a mouthful of food at the kill site before the alphas have given you permission to do so. One of the alphas decides to put you in your place and remind you of your

manners and your position in the dominance hierarchy. The alpha bares its teeth, growls and leaps at you. It does not bite you, however. You tuck your tail between your legs, flop down on the ground, and roll over so that your belly is exposed to the alpha to signal that you accept the higher rank of the alpha and will wait your turn!

7. Exaggerated looking away. It's time to play. You decide to see if any of the other yearlings are interested in a romp or game of tag. You get up, stretch and approach a sibling with your ears flattened and your lips slightly retracted in a smile. Then you suddenly jerk your head around as if to look over your shoulder. “Come on. Let's head over there and play.”

8. Consummatory face. You are out by yourself and suddenly discover a wonderfully awful smell! Upon investigation, you find the partially decayed remains of a dead animal. You want to tell the others in the pack all about it. So you lower your shoulder and have a good rub and a roll in the stuff. You partially flatten your ears, close your eyes, open them and stare off into space as though you are daydreaming. Then you get to your feet and trot off toward the rendezvous site to share your discovery with the others.