

What Animals Are Trying To Tell Us
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When we consult with people concerning the behavior problems of their animals we often hear the remark “I know Fluffy peed on my shoes to tell me something” or “I think Rover was trying to tell me something when he destroyed the inside of my car”. These pet owners want us to help them figure out what it is their pets are trying to communicate. Many times, the answer is that the animal is not trying to communicate anything at all. The idea that animals intend to communicate with us by misbehaving is anthropomorphic (giving human characteristics to animals) and is usually related to notions of spite or revenge such as Rover destroying the car because the owner wouldn’t take him for a walk. Such interpretations are not accurate nor helpful in resolving problem behaviors.

Communication is when one individual sends a signal that alters the behavior of another individual. When animals try to communicate with people they usually use the same signals that they would use with other members of their species. Destroying things does not appear to be a common dog to dog signal. Dogs and cats usually communicate directly with others by sounds, smells, touch or visual displays. A dog might paw at you to get your attention or a cat might growl at you to get you to back away. These misbehaviors are intended as communication. Rarely do animals leave messages after the fact. An example of this type of indirect communication is the odor or smell from urine or scratch marks (dogs and cats have scent glands on their foot pads). But in these cases, it is not the behavior of urinating or scratching that is communicative, but the odor that remains. If your cat urinates on your shoes, she may be urine marking to communicate with you or even with another cat. But she may also be ill or she may just prefer your shoes to her litterbox as a place to urinate.

Assuming that all animal misbehaviors are attempts at communication may obscure the real reasons for the behavior. Many times animals misbehave with no obvious intent to communicate at all. Digging holes, eating plants, destroying personal items, most housesoiling behaviors, or compulsive behavior such as tail chasing have motivations other than communication.