

Why Does Your Dog Lick Your Hand?

Dogs lick your hands at strange times. Sometimes it seems like a way of saying hello. Sometimes, it seems to be almost an apology, but several minutes after the problem behavior has passed.

So, why does your dog lick your hand?

Licking, in general, has several purposes. First, it is a form of self-grooming and, at times, grooming of others in the social group (also called all-grooming). Second, mothers with puppies will lick to clean them and to stimulate urination and defecation. Third, juvenile dogs and wolves lick the mouth of adults as a form of greeting which also stimulates regurgitation of eaten food (a convenient way to transport hunted prey back to the den).



The licking behavior of pet dogs is probably derived from this last behavior - a combination of begging and greeting, which also signals subordinate rank. In some cases extreme or constant licking may indicate a compulsive disorder. While compulsive disorder is relatively uncommon, licking is a universal social signal among dogs.

Habitual licking is probably a combination of evolutionary derived behavior and learned (reinforced) behavior. After all, when dogs lick our hands we are quietly grateful.