

What Did You Say?

Post Activity

Program at Nature Station: Canine Communication

Grade Level: 3rd – 6th

Program Length:

Prep time: none

Activity time: varied

Group size: Variable

Setting: Classroom or outdoors

Vocabulary:

- canine: any member of the *Canidae*, or dog family, including the wolves, jackals, hyenas, coyotes, foxes and domestic dogs

Materials: None

Background Information:

Canines howl for various reasons including locating each other in unfamiliar territory, assembling the pack, communicating alarm or danger, announcing or defending a fresh kill, marking their territory, sending messages over great distances, and promoting pack unity. Contrary to popular belief, canines do NOT howl at the moon. This activity will help your students learn how another species is able to communicate occasionally complex messages among its members.

Procedure:

Divide the class into smaller groups or “packs.” Tell the students that they are going to learn an entirely new language that they themselves will make up! Discuss with them how canines communicate with each other by howling, the reasons why they howl, and what advantages howling has for canines. Tell them that working within their own packs, they are to come up with their own canine language (real words are not allowed!) of sounds to communicate the meanings of messages you give them (see those listed under Background for this activity). Allow them to make up and practice their canine language. **WARNING!** This may get a little noisy, so you might want to consider taking the class outside.

Once they have had time to practice their “language,” take the class outside and separate them. Have the different pack members send messages to each other over different distances to determine the effectiveness of their communications. Try this when they are able to see each other and also when they cannot see each other. See if pack members are able to correctly identify other members of their pack when blindfolded or when otherwise unable to see them. Which pack was able to communicate most effectively? Which pack could communicate over the longest distance? Who was the loudest howler? Regardless of how this works out, you and your students will have a “howling” good time!

Extension: Have each pack choose a den site. Have them howl at each other in order to determine their pack's territorial boundaries. Then have each pack draw a map of the different packs' boundaries as near as they can determine from their howling. Compare the maps of each pack. How closely do they resemble each other? Ask the students what other ways might canines use to settle territorial boundary disputes.

Assessment or Evaluation:

Each pack could be evaluated on how clearly they are able to communicate with each other and how well each pack member knows his/her pack's calls.

Source:

GETTING TO KNOW THE WOLF: A Teacher's Guide to the "Wolf Pac" Materials. A School Outreach Project of the National Park Service. Written by Joseph W. Zarki. Illustrated by Ellen Meloy. 1989.